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July 12, 1887.

Vol. XX.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 520.



EVERY BASILISK EYE WAS UPON THE DARING WHITE BOY, WHO HAD THUS
INVADED THEIR VILLAGE.

OR, A CRIMSON TRAIL.

A Romance of a Border Boy's Life.*

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUCK TAYLOR, KING OF THE
COWBOYS," "NEVADA NED, THE REVOL-
VER RANGER," "ARIZONA JOE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

"Now I know where I am, so I'll just take a
good nap and then strike for home, for I guess
they think I'm dead and scalped."

The speaker was a youth of seventeen, dressed

*G. W. Middleton, Indian Agent, Indian Territory;
also known as "Good Medicine" and "Dead Shot
Bill."

in a buckskin suit, much the worse for use, and wearing moccasins and a sombrero ornamented with tarnished silver embroidery.

His form was slender, wiry and yet athletic, and his face clear-cut, fearless and intelligent.

His bronzed complexion, torn moccasins and general appearance indicated that he had something of a rough experience of late, and his face was pinched as with hunger and suffering.

But his look was determined, his blue eyes bright and piercing, and he tossed back his long, yellow hair with the air of one who defied danger and hard luck.

He had no weapons of any kind, and it seemed strange that he should be there upon the wild prairie with no means of defense about him.

"I'm about as tired as I am hungry; but it will be a good twenty-four hours before I can get anything to eat, though I can sleep, and with no fear of nightmare from overeating," and he laughed lightly.

He was looking about for a bed upon the leaves, when he happened to glance out upon the prairie.

"Lizards and wildcats! look a-yonder!"

He stood like one paralyzed by what his eyes rested upon.

He was in a small timber motte, where the trees grew quite thick, and through an opening he had gotten a glimpse of the prairie beyond.

What he saw was a large body of Indians on horseback, and riding directly toward the spot where he was.

He realized the situation at a glance.

He was a mere boy, unarmed, alone, many, many miles from the nearest settlement, and in a clump of timber a couple of acres in size, surrounded by prairies, which for a long distance allowed no shelter from observation, should he attempt to fly for safety.

It was near nightfall, for the sun was just upon the horizon, and the Indians, some half a hundred in number, were coming straight to the timber.

They were not half a mile away, had just come over a rise in the prairie, and, should he leave the covert of the woods, he would be instantly discovered.

It was a perilous situation in the extreme, and one to try an old borderman's iron nerves.

"Holy smoke! I'm a dead duck, sure as shootin'," said the youth with a long-drawn breath.

"Scalped in ten minutes, by Grandfather's Clock, I'll be, and coyote pickings in the morning."

He spoke calmly, yet he realized fully all that he had to face.

His thoughts traveled fast, as he looked about him for some means of escape, though it seemed hopeless.

Suddenly he glanced upward, and far up a tree he beheld a spot which seemed to offer a chance of safety.

A large branch, torn off by the wind, had caught in a crotch of the tree. Could he reach it, he might find a hiding-place.

He could but try, and try he did. Up the tall trunk of the tree he went, with the agility of a cat.

At last he reached the branch, shook it, and finding it firm, stretched himself out upon it at full length.

"It's lucky I'm half-starved, for it makes me thinner," he muttered with grim humor.

The branch was nearly as large as his body, and so would shield him from observation below, especially in the gathering twilight.

Then the leaves had dried upon the branches, and it in a manner protected him.

Fully forty feet above the ground, and having to lie in a cramped position, and at the same time be careful not to roll off, his situation was not an enviable one.

But he lay there awaiting the coming of the Indians.

"I'm glad I hav'n't got any weapons," he said, adding: "I wouldn't know what to do with them here."

The Indians were on horseback, and riding directly toward the spot where he was.

"They are mighty cautious; but I don't want to scare 'em," the youth remarked, as he saw them separate and form a circle around the timber.

Then they advanced and rode in from all sides.

"Good evening, gents," whispered the boy to himself, in the same reckless manner that seemed to be natural to him.

"I'm as glad to see you as if I'd run a nail in my foot."

The sun had now gone down below the horizon and the red-skins went into camp in the

timber, the chief taking up his quarters just under the tree in which the boy was stationed.

"Apaches," he said shortly, recognizing what tribe they belonged to.

"Lordy! they've got two prisoners—yes, poor Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter of our outfit. They'll salt 'em down sure as shootin'," he muttered.

It was true; the red-skins had in their midst two prisoners—men whose appearance indicated them to be bordermen.

They were securely tied to their horses, but upon reaching the timber were unfastened and made to dismount.

Then they were tied fast to the tree in which the youth was hiding.

The red-skins quickly staked out their ponies, sent sentinels on duty, and then built a fire to cook their supper by.

The smoke came straight up into the face of the hiding youth, nearly suffocating him, and the effort to keep from coughing was terrible.

"I wish I could save 'em," muttered the boy, referring to the two prisoners, and he added in his quaint way:

"I hain't so laughin' safe myself, I guess, for they've got me treed, that's certain."

"I could scare 'em into fits if I dropped down on their heads with a healthy yell; but, I guess I'd get the worst of it. No, I rather like this roost, and I'll crow when daylight breaks and they git. Lordy! just smell that boilin' buffalo-meat! Oh! but it smells good, and yet I'll not ask for any. I doesn't take supper when I'm not invited, even if I know I would be welcome."

"That's the same band that surprised us, and I guess as they've got Reuben and Dan all the other boys was killed."

"I wish I had a fish-hook and line; I'd get me a piece of boiled buffalo, soon as they got through eating."

And thus the boy made his comments, taking the ludicrous side of everything, in spite of his deadly peril.

One by one the warriors gorged themselves with the roasted meat, and then went off to the spots they had chosen for their night's slumber.

The chief rolled his blanket about him, and, without giving a morsel of food to the two prisoners, laid down to sleep almost at their feet, as they sat, still bound to the tree.

Soon after the whole camp was in repose, and the youth from his lofty perch found it difficult to keep awake, though to drop off to sleep and fall to the ground would, he knew, be certain death.

CHAPTER II. BUCKSKIN BILLY.

In a lonely part of the Indian Territory, upon the banks of a beautiful stream, there stood the home of the youth whose perilous situation has been described in the foregoing chapter.

It was an attractive home, the best in the scattered settlement, and there dwelt Dr. Middleton, a worthy settler in that wild land, and his family, consisting of his wife and three children, a son of twenty, a daughter of eighteen and the hero of this story, Billy, a youth, at the time he is presented to the reader, in his fifteenth year.

Billy had been born upon the plains, so to speak, for his birthplace was the Indian Territory, and it may be that this fact made him a natural rover.

When but half a dozen years old, he could ride a mustang, and shoot a rifle, and as he grew in years he was wont to stray off alone, with his dog and gun, get lost about four times a year and have the whole settlement out hunting for him, when he would turn up of his own accord from some unexpected quarter.

His frequent acquaintance with a strap in his father's hand, did not cure him of his wandering propensities, and he kept it up until one day he got lost in earnest, for he was picked up by a band of Comanches and carried off.

The settlement turned out to hunt him up, but he could not be found, Indian signs were discovered, and as weeks went by and Billy did not reappear he was set down as dead, and all the old women had the satisfaction of saying:

"I told you so."

But Billy had a way of saying that he would always turn up all right, and he had the satisfaction of proving his—"I told you so," by one morning appearing at home, just before breakfast, mounted upon an Indian pony, dressed from head to foot in buckskin, and all the beads, feathers and toggery of a full-fledged Indian.

His story was soon told. He had been captured by the Comanches, and carried to their village,

where he had been kept a prisoner for months. Billy was shrewd, and he had appeared more than happy with his captivity, and, a boy as he was, did not trouble the red-skins much.

So one night he decided to leave.

For weeks he had laid his plans, simply and skillfully, and, creeping out of his tepee in a drenching storm, had coolly gone to the corral, stolen a pony, and armed only with the bow, arrows and lance of the Comanches, had set out for home.

The pouring rain had effaced his trail, and when the morning dawned he was eight hours ahead of pursuit, he well knew, and so had no fear.

From that day the youth was a hero in the settlement, and settlers gave him the name of Buckskin Bill, which has clung to him through all the years that have passed since then.

Proud of his name, Billy Middleton took great pains to always wear buckskin, and his mother and sister kept him supplied with a handsome suit.

After his experience with the Indians, Buckskin Bill was considered, young as he was, an authority on matters pertaining to red-skins, and his parents, though anxious when he went roving off alone on the prairies, had abounding faith in his ability to take care of himself.

There was a school in the settlement, which Buckskin Bill attended, riding the five miles from his home to the log cabin every morning, and, a hero among his schoolmates, he was anxious to be looked upon as ahead in his lessons, and so studied hard to keep at the honor-end of his class.

His father had bought him a rifle, his brother had given him a revolver, his pony was the one which he had brought from the Indian village, and so he was well fixed.

One morning, upon his way to school, Buckskin Bill suddenly came across a trail that caused him to halt, dismount, and examine it.

"Inguns, sure!" he muttered.

"And there are just thirteen of 'em."

"Mother says that is an unlucky number."

"I guess I'll see what them reds are about, so near the settlement."

So saying Buckskin Bill set about following the trail, and in half an hour came to the conclusion that the Indians were concealed in a timber motte ahead.

He knew that the log-cabin school was but a short distance away, and he supposed the Indians were lying in wait to dash upon the place when all the children were within and thus get a large number of young scalps.

So Buckskin Bill crept back from his point of observation, made a flank movement and was soon at the school.

He was late, but went up to the teacher, who was also the parson of the settlement, and said:

"Parson Green, there are Inguns."

"Indian, William, Indian—I—n—d—i—n, Indian, not I—n—g—u—n—Injun," corrected the dominie.

"Yes, sir, Indian—well there are Indian signs about, for I struck a trail of thirteen ponies and they are over in the island motte, just waiting for us, I guess."

"My son, this is startling news, indeed."

"I will at once dismiss the school, and—"

"No, parson, I guess we can do better than that."

"What can we do?"

"Well, sir, they will have to cross the prairie for nearly half a mile to get here, and I can go out and watch for them, and we can just give them a surprise party."

"Why, William, what do you mean?"

"Well, sir, the large boys are all armed and there are sixteen of us, and you, sir, and me can just lay for the reds and when they think they think they are creeping up on us, we will give them a salute."

"Ah, William, you are an old boy, and I fear will one day turn to war."

"But I am a man of peace, and I will not advise in this matter, other than to say we had better all leave and alarm the settlement."

"No, sir, for finding us gone the Indians could escape before the settlers rallied."

"I'll fix it all right, sir, if you will let me, and—"

"Do as you think best, William, for as this is a question outside of books I yield to you in it."

"Thank you, sir," and Buckskin Bill hastily told the school children what he had seen, and what he felt sure was the intention of the red-skin raiders.

Then he got the girls in one position away from the windows and doors, and placed the fifteen boys who had weapons, ranging from

rifles to shot-guns and revolvers, at the three windows and the door.

"Now I'll go and see if they are coming."

So saying he slipped out of the cabin, leaving an anxious but brave little party behind him, not one of the border girls fainting or crying to unnerve their daring young brothers, and the calm courage of the parson being of great service to them.

The horses ridden by the boys and girls, were all kept back of the school-house, where they were staked out on a bit of meadow land.

The Indians would not approach from this way, Buckskin Bill thought, but would hope to carry off the little herd, which consisted of some half a hundred animals, for Parson Green had a goodly number of youngsters under his charge, and all had to go to school on horse-back, some riding as far as a dozen miles each morning and evening in their search for learning.

When Buckskin Bill had reached the edge of the woods he glanced out over the prairie, keeping himself hidden.

Hardly had he done so, when out from a motte a mile away, rode a band of red-skins.

They were thirteen in number, a chief rode at their head and they came straight on toward the log-house school, which was several hundred yards in the rear of where Buckskin Bill was in hiding.

CHAPTER III.

BORDER BOYS AT BAY.

BUCKSKIN BILL at once made known the fact to the dominie, and the scholars, that the red-skins were coming.

All was at once a scene of suppressed excitement, the girls turning pale, yet keeping perfectly quiet, while the boys were glad to get a chance to "show off" before their sweethearts and sisters.

The dominie, in the goodness of his soul, offered up a short, fervent prayer, and then Buckskin Bill, the chosen captain of the log-house "fort," as the boys called it, took a position to watch the coming of the red cut-throats.

It did not take very long for the warriors to cross the prairie, and, reaching the woods they at once dismounted and made their horses fast.

Buckskin Bill was standing on a shelf, gazing through a crevice in the walls, and reported progress.

The manner in which the red-skins moved convinced him that they had a leader who knew the settlement and the situation of the school-house.

They separated, formed a line, and began to creep from the tree.

"Parson?"

"Yea, William?"

"You know that sneaking fellow, Half-Breed Joe?"

"Yes, William."

"Well, he is the guide, for I saw him just now dodge behind a tree, and he wishes to get revenge because we drove him out of the settlement for stealing," whispered Buckskin Bill.

"Providence will preserve us from the wicked doer," said the parson.

Continuing his watching the young leader saw the red-skins creep nearer and nearer until they came to the edge of the timber that skirted the open space on which the school-house was built.

Here they paused, completely shielded.

"B-a-k-e-r, spelled Baker," Buckskin Bill, in a loud tone, for the benefit of Half-Breed Joe, who he knew understood English well, and would tell the warriors they were not expecting an attack.

"Let the girls sing, parson," whispered Buckskin Bill, and the girls started up a Sunday-school hymn, the parson leading, though their voices quivered a little.

Instantly a tall Indian stepped out from the cover. It was Half-Breed Joe, and he seemed to realize, as he knew the customs of the whites well, and had often been to the school, that the scholars were going through their exercises, so no danger of discovery need be apprehended.

The other Indians at once followed his example, and all moved cautiously toward the school-house.

When they had gotten within thirty paces, crouching and sneaking along, though they expected a surprise, Buckskin Bill whispered:

"I will take Joe, so you boys aim at the others, when I give the word."

The boys had each one a convenient crevice between the logs, and all were ready when Buckskin Bill sung out:

"Fire!"

At the same time his finger touched the trigger of his own rifle, and Half-Breed Joe, the treacherous scamp, fell dead in his tracks.

The chief also fell, with two others, and several more were wounded.

It was an utter surprise to the red-skins, and they dashed for cover with all speed.

But, seizing a rifle handed him by the parson, Buckskin Bill fired again and with fatal effect, while the boys stationed at the door and other windows came running with their weapons to that side of the house.

"Yell, boys, yell! and follow me!" shouted Buckskin Bill, and in a moment he had dashed out of the school-house, followed by his school-mates.

But, several of the wounded Indians hastily opened fire with their bows and arrows, and Buckskin saw a comrade fall, and at the same time received an arrow in his arm.

But it did not check the brave boy, and he ran on, while the others followed his lead, and it was not very long before the only Indians to be seen about, were dead ones, while off on the prairie, riding at full speed, were five who had escaped, and were hastening back to their stronghold in the mountains, completely demoralized by their defeat, and vowing vengeance against Half-Breed Joe, who they believed had led them into a trap, for his urging had caused a dozen of the more reckless young bucks of the tribe to take the war-path, with the hope of getting half a hundred children's scalps and capturing their horses.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BOY DEAD-SHOT.

THE fight at the school-house, in which eight red-skins were slain, and a fearful calamity averted, in the massacre of so many children, caused Buckskin Bill to become more of a hero than ever.

There were old heads who said that the parson should at once have turned the scholars out and alarmed the settlement; but then had they done so, the red-skins could have escaped and doubtless would have again attempted a raid, and so Buckskin Bill's plan was considered the right one by many.

The chief's horse, which was a splendid animal, fell to the young leader as his property, and all congratulated the boy upon his marked success, while there was no mourning for Half-Breed Joe, who, after having been well treated in the settlement, had been caught stealing and driven off.

He had vowed revenge, but no one had suspected his intention to carry it out so cruelly.

Soon after this affair, Mr. Middleton, the father of Buckskin Bill, went on a trip to Pike's Peak, and the boy accompanied him.

It was a long and dangerous expedition, and the experience it gave Buckskin Bill was of the greatest use to him.

One day the party on the way came across a Government train going the same way, and the conversation around the camp-fire that night turned upon dead-shot shooting.

The sergeant in charge of the Government train, which was going to a frontier fort with stores and recruits, said that he had half a dozen of the best shots on the border with him.

Mr. Middleton, who was in charge of the settlers' expedition, remarked that there were several good shots in his outfit, and offered to match their best marksman against the crack shot that the sergeant would produce.

Bets were at once made, and the next day camp was made earlier than usual, and the two selected marksmen were ordered to get ready.

To the surprise of the sergeant and his men, a mere boy was pitted against their crack marksman, who was an old borderman.

The sergeant was at first angry, but Mr. Middleton said:

"The money is up on my boy, and if your man can outshoot him, you win it and we lose, and that is all there is about it."

So the range was measured off, and the borderman, who was known as "Old Never Miss," fired his half-dozen shots with his rifle, the target chosen being a piece of paper stuck upon a tree, with a bull's-eye about four inches in diameter.

The borderman put the six shots in the bull's-eye, loading and firing rapidly, and the men of the Government train yelled themselves hoarse with delight.

Then Mr. Middleton took the lid of a blacking-box, and half-encircling it with his left thumb and finger, held it off at arm's length, taking his stand at the tree upon which the target of Old Never Miss was placed.

Resting his hand against the tree, he called out:

"Ready, Billy!"

"You hain't gwine ter be fool enough to do thet, is yer, pard?" asked Old Never Miss.

"Oh, yes."

"He'll shoot yer hand ter pieces."

"I'll risk it," was the quiet response, and loading and firing rapidly, Buckskin Bill sent the six bullets at the target.

The sergeant had stood near Mr. Middleton, and took the lid and came rapidly toward the two timekeepers.

"What's his time?" he called out.

"Beats Never Miss a quarter of a minute, sergeant," was the answer.

"And he has put every bullet into a space half as small as you did, Never Miss, and with his father holding the target," was the reply.

A yell greeted the words of the sergeant and the old borderman stepped forward and grasped the boy's hand, while he said:

"Leetle pard, I caves, and you is the best I ever tackled, and some day folks will hear o' you as a boss shooter."

Buckskin Bill took his triumph coolly, but he was, at heart, greatly elated over having beaten the old borderman, whose fame he had heard of.

When he returned to the settlement, he at once settled down to school once more, under Parson Green's teaching, and was looked upon as more than ever a hero, after his trip to Pike's Peak, and having beaten the old frontiersman, Never Miss, in dead-shot shooting.

CHAPTER V.

THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK.

ALTHOUGH he studied hard, Buckskin Bill was always glad of a chance to get away from the settlement, on any expedition in which there was danger to be overcome, and his parents always allowed him to go with a party of settlers, on a grand hunt, or to drive cattle or bring stores by wagon train from the towns.

On such an expedition, when acting as one of a guard for a wagon-train, belonging to the storekeeper of the settlement, Buckskin Bill came very near having his life snuffed out without warning.

The train consisted of four wagons, drawn by mules, and they were loaded with goods and stores such as were needed in the settlement.

The outfit belonged to Hal Rice, the storekeeper, and he was wont to pay a good price for men who would go as a guard for it to and from the town, a distance of two hundred miles.

Half a dozen men generally comprised the number, besides the four drivers, and were considered sufficient to protect it against any ordinary force of red-skins or outlaw band that might attack it.

One of the men was a guide, and a good one, except when he was wont to get upon a spree, and then he became reckless.

Buckskin Bill took the idea that he would like to go as a guard, on the next trip of the wagon-train, and he spoke to Hal Rice, the storekeeper, about it and his services were at once engaged with the remark:

"I'm more than glad to have you, Billy, for you're as good as any man, in my opinion, and I'll pay you just the same as I do the others."

"Then, Billy, study up the trails well, for I don't think Pilot Pete will be my guide much longer, as he's getting too lazy and fond of liquor and it won't do to trust him."

So Buckskin Bill went with the "store outfit," as the train was called, when it pulled out of the settlement for the distant town.

They reached the town all right, took aboard their freight and started on the home trail.

But Pilot Pete had begun to drink upon reaching the town, and two others of the party had been readily led away to follow his example.

The result of this was that the train pulled out for home with Pilot Pete still on a spree, and two of the men were left behind, being unable to return with the wagons.

One of them was a wagon-driver, and Bill had to take his place and drive.

Twice did the train cross trails which Pilot Pete said were made by Indians on the war-path, and yet, reckless from drink, he took no care to go on scouts ahead of the party, and at night was more anxious to play cards around the camp-fire than to stand guard.

Buckskin Bill saw that everything was going wrong, for the example of Pilot Pete was demoralizing in the extreme, and all but two of the men were also drinking.

Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter, the two sober men, had a talk with Buckskin Bill, the first opportunity they had, and the three decided that they would stand guard at night, for they could appreciate their danger.

The train was wont to make from thirty to

thirty-five miles a day, so that it was a week on the trail returning to the settlement.

As the party still kept up their carousing, a quantity of liquor having been brought along by Pilot Pete, after four nights' watching and working by day, Buckskin Bill and the two sober men were completely broken down, and they had a pretty plain talk with the guide, who promised that he would not touch another drop to drink for the rest of the way, and would also sober up the others.

He also said he would stand guard that night, and worn out as they were, Buckskin Bill and the two faithful men were only too glad to seek rest.

Had Pilot Pete kept his word all would have gone well; but the moment the trio of faithful guards were sleeping soundly, he left his post of duty, again took to his bottle, a fire was built, in spite of the danger, for the train was in the most dangerous part of the trail just then, and the carousers began once more to play cards.

The fire was shaded from the eyes of the sleepers, and, worn out as they were, they did not awaken until wild yells sounded in their ears, followed by shots and cries.

Half-awake, bewildered, and not knowing what was the matter, Buckskin Bill sprung from his blanket and ran like a deer through the timber.

It was all that saved him, for, when he collected his scattered senses, and regained his nerves once more, he halted and looked back.

The camp-fire was burning brightly, and he saw that there were half a hundred wild Apaches yelling and bounding about like demons, and that they had slain his comrades he felt assured.

Without a weapon, he knew not what to do at first.

But, as the Apaches continued their wild orgies of delight, Buckskin Bill came to the conclusion that the best thing for him to do was to place all the distance possible between them and himself.

So he bounded away in flight, and did not stop running until he was a mile away on the prairie.

Then, tired out, panting, he dropped down to rest and think.

"The train is captured and the boys are wiped out!"

"There's no denying that," he said at last.

"It's all Pilot Pete's fault, too, for he promised to quit drinking and stand guard, and now I remember hearing him and the others laughing and playing cards, and seeing the firelight; but I was too sleepy to wake up."

"Well, the Indians waked me up, that's a fact; but my poor pard's gone—all dead and scalped, that's sure."

"And I ain't so very happy, neither."

"My! but didn't I run!" and the youth actually laughed at his own fright, while half-asleep.

"Nothing to eat, no weapons, no blanket, nothing."

"I'm in a bad fix, and the sooner I strike for the settlement the better."

"There's the camp-fire, so let me get my bearings, and then I'm off."

He stood for a while looking toward the distant camp-fire, before which he saw forms of red-skins constantly moving, and then, having discovered which way he should go, he started off at a trot, anxious to get as far off as possible before day should break, when he feared the Indians might find his trail and follow it.

It was two days after, when half-starved, worn down with tramping, and suffering from the cold nights, that Buckskin Bill is presented to the reader, when the same band of Indians who had attacked the train, and with Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter prisoners, entered the timber motte to camp for the night, and by so doing sent him hiding up in a tree like a squirrel to escape from his deadly foes.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

NEVER before in his life, and never since, we will candidly admit, did Buckskin Bill pass such a long night.

Several times he caught himself dropping off to sleep, and, as he had to constantly balance himself to keep from falling off, he would start at the danger he was in, and keep awake for an hour, when again his heavy eyes would close, and once again he would nearly fall off of his perch.

At last, as he was again napping, Buckskin Bill heard the sound of a voice.

Instantly he was awake.

It was the voice of one of the prisoners ad-

ressing his comrade, and saying, in a low tone:

"I'm about used up, Pard Dan."

"So be it, for these ropes cut fearful," was the answer.

Several of the red-skins started up at the word, and one arose and hastily examined the bands of the prisoners.

But, seeing that they were secure, and had only been talking to each other, the red-skins again laid down and went to sleep.

This caused Buckskin Bill to have the idea to speak to the two prisoners, and, stripping off a piece of bark, he dropped it down upon the head of one of the men.

At the same time he said in a low tone:

"Hist!"

The men did not start, even.

They were too good bordermen for that.

And yet they knew that some one other than a red-skin had uttered the word.

They kept their eyes upon the Indians lying near them, and not seeing one of them move, Dan Ellis said, in a tone as though addressing his comrade at his side:

"Well, pard?"

"It's me—Buckskin Bill," came in a hoarse voice, to imitate that of a man.

"Waal, ef I knows whar yer is, durn me," said Reuben Carter.

"Maybe it's Bill's ghost, pard," Dan Ellis added.

"Not much ghost, you bet; but Buckskin Bill, and I'm going to see what I can do for you, pards," came from the tree.

"Whar is yer, Pard Bill?"

"Treed," was the significant response.

Then the chief moved, and silence followed.

Soon after the eastern sky grew gray, and, as if by instinct, the red-skins awoke.

Those on watch came in and reported no danger near; a fire was built and Buckskin Bill had to again suffer torment with the smell of boiling meat beneath his nose.

He felt happy, however, that he had caused his two comrades to know that he was near them, and not a prisoner, and he knew that it would give them hope that he would, as soon as he could, get pursuers on the track of the red-skins.

Buckskin Bill had been very anxious to learn the Indian language, and he had picked up considerable Apache, while Comanche he spoke quite well, after his imprisonment among the latter tribe.

He heard the Indians discussing their plans, and learned that they meant to go to the southward and hunt buffalo for a couple of days, when they would be joined by a larger party, and then go and attack the Comanche village up in the mountains.

The buffalo hunting Bucksin Bill found out was but a blind to their intention of a raid upon the Comanche village, and the red-skins then in the timber had simply come ahead as an advance party to look over the ground.

The capture of the store train, killing of some of the men, and capture of Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter, was also discussed with delight, and the mules and horses thus taken they then had with them, loaded down with the plunder of the wagons, the latter having been burned.

It was a bitter thing for Bill to see the red-skins feasting off of the provisions taken from the train, and to feel that he was actually starving.

He was, however, glad to find out that they had not suspected his presence with the train, and believed that they had killed and captured the entire outfit.

"You've got me up a tree, but I'm all right so far," muttered the youth.

Then he added, as he saw that they gave the two prisoners only a small piece of buffalo-meat apiece:

"Oh, you stingy varmints."

It was just daybreak when the party left the motte, greatly to the boy's delight, for he knew that he could not hope to escape being seen in the glare of the sunlight.

He thought he saw both Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter look up toward his perch and then say something to each other; but he kept very close to the limb of the tree, and watched the departure of the red-skins with a delight he had never experienced at any event that had happened in his life before.

Hardly had the last red-skin departed, when Buckskin Bill began to descend from the tree.

He was ravenous with hunger and hoped to find some scraps left by the Indians which he could eat, though he was aware that they were a race which generally, so to speak, "licked the platter clean."

"Snakes and goblins! I'm in luck," he cried, as he beheld a bow leaning against the tree, and a quiver of arrows hanging to it.

Then he spied several pieces of buffalo-meat lying near the fire, which was dying out, and he threw them upon the coals, being hardly able to wait until they were cooked, so hungry was he.

"Lordy! I'm done for," he suddenly cried, as he heard a voice behind him, and turning, beheld an Indian brave, belaboring his pony for stumbling with him, as he came riding toward the fire.

CHAPTER VII.

BUCKSKIN BILL'S LUCK.

BUCKSKIN BILL, when he first beheld the mounted warrior, coming like a phantom horseman through the gloom of early morning, supposed that he had at his back the entire band, which a quarter of an hour before had left the motte.

The stumbling of the Indian's pony had caused him to utter an impatient imprecation upon the animal, in his best style of red-skin anathemas, little dreaming that his voice reached other ears, while his attention to the horse prevented his seeing Buckskin Bill's sudden spring behind the tree.

The broiling of the buffalo beef did not seem suspicious to the red-skin either, when the scent reached his olfactories, as the braves were wont to toss their well-picked bones and leavings into the fire.

It took Buckskin Bill just a second to gain the shelter of the tree, another to glance out through the timber and discover that the horseman was alone, and a third to understand why the brave had returned.

"He wants his bow and arrows which he left here."

"I won't be mean, for he shall have one of the arrows," he muttered, and ere the warrior had ridden three lengths of his horse, the youth had fixed an arrow to the bow and had it aimed.

A moment more and the red-skin was almost upon the boy, and then the arrow, drawn back with all the strength of his arm, was let go.

Buckskin Bill's aim was for the throat, to kill instantly and to shut off a war-cry that might be heard by the others, hardly more than a mile away.

The arrow-head, sent true to aim, was buried in the Indian's neck, and, hardly had it touched the flesh ere Buckskin Bill, with a spring like a panther upon its prey, was out from behind the tree and had seized the bridle-rein.

The pony, startled by the sudden appearance, reared wildly, and his red-skin rider fell heavily to the ground.

But Buckskin Bill held on to the pony like grim death, and his voice soon quieted the animal.

Making him fast to a tree, the brave youth at once stepped to the side of the fallen Indian, who was dead; there was no doubt of that. The arrow had pierced the jugular vein and the warrior had not known what killed him.

For a moment the boy stood in an attitude of meditation, and he looked down upon the red-skin with an air of regret.

"He'd have killed me, if I hadn't shot him," he mused, as if to palliate his act in his own mind.

The brave was a small man, with painted face; he carried a knife in his belt, his bow and arrow having been left beside the tree, and thus cost him his life in returning to get them.

The day had now dawned and the east was getting rosy-hued under the sun, and the youth gazed eagerly about him.

It did not take him very long to make up his mind, as to what he should do, and gathering up his broiled steaks he hastily thrust them into a pouch which the red-skin carried, and which already held some provisions taken from the store train.

Then he tied up the neck of the Indian, to prevent the dripping of the blood, and raising the body in his strong arms, threw it across the back of the pony.

The stains on the ground were then effaced, and springing up on the back of the pony Buckskin Bill rode out of the timber, taking the trail by which the band of red-skins had come the evening before, so as to have the tracks of his horse confused with the others.

Not a sign of a red-skin was seen upon the prairie, and Buckskin Bill pressed on at a trot along the trail until he came to a ridge, heavily timbered, and around the base of which wound a deep, swiftly flowing stream.

"Here you've got to go in swimming, Mister Apache," said Buckskin Bill, and riding the

pony into the stream up to his neck, he tumbled the body into the water, having first borrowed his blanket and knife.

The current carried the dead Indian swiftly away, and the youth remarked:

"I thought this would be better than burying him or leaving him in the motte for those who might come looking for him to find."

"Now I guess I've thrown 'em off my trail; but I'll give them another riddle to guess, if they should track the pony this far."

"Come, Red-skin, you must swim for it."

As he spoke he turned the head of the pony down-stream and the animal was borne swiftly along.

After quite a long swim he went to one side where the water was shallow and rested his pony, and then again continued his swimming.

This he repeated several times until he had left the fort a mile behind him, and then he rode ashore at a point where the hard nature of the ground would leave no track.

Dismounting, after a short ride, he gave the pony a rest, while he ate the breakfast he had been so longing for, and was delighted to find some crackers in the Indian's buckskin pouch.

Having satisfied his hunger and taken a drink of the cold water from the stream, Buckskin Bill muttered:

"Now for the Comanche village, and I guess they won't kill me when they know the news I bring."

"But Dan and Reuben must be saved, and I could never reach the settlement in time, while the settlers would not dare pursue the Apaches into their own country."

"No, I must risk the Comanches, that is my only chance."

"And here goes."

Away went the pony at a canter, the youth knowing just which way lay the Comanche village, which he boldly intended to visit, in his endeavor to save his two comrades, Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter from the Apaches.

"It may be out of the frying-pan into the fire for the boys; but I'm going to risk it, even if they nab me too."

And the brave youth pressed rapidly on, the captured pony proving an uncommonly good animal, which caused the youth to congratulate himself over and over again on the good luck which had fallen upon him.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE LION'S DEN.

In his many wanderings about the country, Buckskin Bill had learned pretty well the points of the compass, where the settlements lay and the situation of the Indian villages.

He also knew the hunting-grounds of both the Apaches and Comanches, and was, therefore, well able to avoid any ordinary danger that might beset his path.

He had decided, and wisely, that if he went to the settlements for aid, the fate of Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter would be sealed, for the Apaches would have ample time to get back to their villages, and once there no hope could there be for their prisoners.

So Buckskin Bill came to the conclusion to strike with all speed for the Comanche village.

"If I can make it a case of Kilkenny cats, I'm all right," was his argument, referring to the fact that the Comanches and Apaches would fight it out among themselves.

Having thrown the Apaches off his trail, or tried to do so, he had gotten rid of the body of the brave he had killed, and found himself, from half-starved, tired, unarmed and on foot, with a good horse, plenty to eat and a bow and arrows, while what he had in view prevented him from feeling his fatigue.

So well had he covered up all signs of the struggle in the motte, that he did not much fear pursuit by the Apaches, who, seeing the tracks of the pony, might think their comrade had gone off alone for some reason, or perhaps his horse had gotten away from him and he had pursued on foot.

That they would scent out the truth, Buckskin Bill did not believe.

So on he pressed toward the Comanche village, where for nearly half a year he had lived as a captive, some two years before.

It was after nightfall when he entered the mountain range in which the village of the Comanches was located, and both his pony and himself were very tired, for he had pushed on all day at a steady pace.

He had hunted with the Indian boys through those mountains, so knew well just which trail to take, and rode into the village unseen by any guard, for he had avoided the places where he

knew the outposts had been located when he was a captive there.

The warriors were many of them scattered about among the mountains, but there was a goodly number present, and they were gathered around the camp-fires, smoking and telling of wondrous deeds performed.

Straight up to the council fire, built near the tepee of the head chief, Fire Eyes, rode Buckskin Bill.

His hands were held above his head, and as he halted his pony with a word, every warrior was upon his feet in an instant.

Having come to a halt, Buckskin Bill quietly surveyed the amazed Comanches, who looked as though one and all of them were about to spring forward and tear him from his pony.

"The pale-face boy!" yelled Fire Eyes in a voice of thunder.

"Yes, I am your pale-face boy captive, Red Scalp, as you called me, and I have come back to your village," replied Buckskin Bill in the Comanche tongue.

"You left my village and my people. Why have you come back to die?" asked Fire Eyes, waving back the braves who seemed to desire to tear the brave boy limb from limb.

"I have not come back to die, but to keep the Comanches from dying. There is danger coming upon them."

The Indians started at this, and Fire Eyes told the youth to dismount.

He did so, and approaching the fire, coolly sat down before it, remaining silent.

Fire Eyes sat by his side, and another great chief, Iron Arm, squatted upon the other side.

Then the warriors took seats in the circle around the fire.

More wood was thrown on, and every basilisk eye was upon the daring white boy, who had thus invaded their village.

Holding out his hand for Fire Eyes's pipe, which the chief held, Buckskin Bill took a whiff or two, with the intention of showing the Comanches that he was upon a mission of peace.

A grunt of satisfaction followed at this, and the pipe was passed around in silence.

For some time no word was spoken, and impatient though he was to tell all he knew, Buckskin Bill was determined to show the Indians that he knew red-skin etiquette, and some fifteen minutes had passed, after his taking a seat at the fire, before he opened his mouth to say why it was he had so fearlessly returned into the den of lions.

CHAPTER IX.

A FORCED COMPACT.

BUCKSKIN BILL knew that he had a dangerous task before him.

That the red-skins felt unkindly toward him for having escaped from their village, he was well aware.

The failure of the party in their attack on the school-house, was also attributed to him, for he had been recognized by several of the young braves when he dashed out of the school-house with the boys at his back.

Now, to venture back into their clutches was a daring thing to do, and looked like defiance of them.

"The Red Scalp is ready to speak," said Bill, after awhile, he having been so named by the Comanches on account of his red hair.

"The Fire Eyes and his braves will hear," responded the chief, who had taken quite a fancy to the boy when he was his captive.

"A train of my people was going to their homes, and it was attacked by a band of Apaches, the bitter foes of the Comanches."

"Two pale-face braves were captured, but the Red Scalp escaped."

"The two pale-faces are the prisoners of the Apaches, and if the Fire Eyes, the Iron Arm and their warriors, will say that my two comrades can go free, the Red Scalp will fill their belts with Apache scalps, and their corrals with the horses of their foes."

"Can the Red Scalp do this?" asked Iron Arm.

"The Red Scalp talks straight!" replied Buckskin Bill.

"He is but a boy, a pappoose," Iron Arm said with a sneer.

"Yet he escaped from the Comanche village, and he has been on the war-trail," the youth replied.

Iron Arm paused and many of the braves gave a look of displeasure.

"When will the Red Scalp do this that he says?" asked Fire Eyes.

"Before two suns."

"How can he?"

"Will the Fire Eyes set the two comrades of

the Red Scalp free, to return to their people, giving them their weapons and their ponies, and let the Red Scalp go too?"

A silence fell upon the party for awhile, and then the chief asked:

"What is it the Red Scalp is to do?"

"Save the Comanches from the Apaches, and ambush their foes so that many, if not all, must die, and their scalps, their arms and ponies will belong to the braves of the Fire Eyes."

"The Red Scalp has spoken, and my warriors have heard!" the Fire Eyes said.

All nodded assent.

"What says the Iron Arm?"

"The pale-face young man talks with a crooked tongue."

"Why has the Red Scalp come to your village, if it was to speak with a crooked tongue?" Buckskin Bill quickly responded.

"No. The Red Scalp could have stayed away," continued the youth, seeing that his question had told on the warriors.

"He need not have come to the Comanche village, to warn them of danger, but remained away and let the Apaches destroy them."

"He need not have risked his life to save the two pale-face captives, but let them die."

"The Red Scalp was a mere boy when he came here a captive."

"You were good to him, and yet he longed to see his home, his people, his mother and father."

"Tears came to his heart, for them, and one night he left your village."

"He now comes back to tell you of danger, to ask you to save yourselves, your squaws and papposes, and to let two captives of the Apaches go free, and you say that he speaks with a crooked tongue."

This speech of Buckskin Bill had been delivered in masterly style.

He had risen from where he was seated and had appealed to the circle of warriors with his earnest words, gestures and words.

They were deeply impressed, and the Fire Eyes said:

"My warriors have hearts."

"Let the Red Scalp remain here, and if his tongue proves crooked, he will die."

"If his tongue is straight, then his white braves can go, but he will remain."

"He must become a young Comanche brave, or die."

So spoke Iron Arm, and the nods of assent that were seen on all sides told Buckskin Bill that his words met the views of nearly all of the warriors.

"The Red Scalp has heard—what says he?"

So asked Fire eyes.

"The Red Scalp will remain in the Comanche village, until his words are proven straight."

"Then he wishes to go with his two white brothers."

"His two white brothers can go; but he must remain," returned Fire Eyes, who was anxious to make a Comanche brave out of the daring white youth.

Buckskin Bill saw that he was in a pickle.

He knew that he could not gain his point then, and so he decided to accept the terms offered.

He concluded that if he could get Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter free, he would be able to make his escape, as he had done once before, when he was much younger.

"I'll make 'em believed I'm tickled nearly to death over staying," he said, and he replied:

"The Red Scalp has heard what the great chief of the Comanches has said."

"He will remain with the Fire Eyes and his people; but the tongue of the Fire Eyes is straight and he will let the two pale-face braves go?"

"The Fire Eyes has a straight tongue," was the reply.

"Now let the Red Scalp tell the warriors of the Comanches all that he knows."

Then Buckskin Bill told how he had been in the timber and heard all that the Apaches had said about going to their hunting-grounds and pretending to hunt until other bands of their braves joined them, when they would make a night-ride upon the village of the Comanches, flanking it, and attacking from an unexpected quarter.

The Comanches grew very uneasy under this story of the youth, and all looked toward Fire Eyes to see the effect upon him.

The chief was certainly deeply moved, and Buckskin Bill, seeing what an alarm his words had caused, muttered to himself:

"I'll just pile on the agony, and maybe they'll let me go, too."

So he doubled the force of the Apaches to

what he supposed they really were, and then, to prove himself worthy of the rank of a warrior, suggested plans for meeting the enemy.

Some of the braves were in favor of marching forth and fighting the Apaches upon the prairie, so they could not get near their village; but Buckskin Bill's suggestion was, as they knew from what quarter to expect them, to place a party of braves to close in after they had passed, and then to ambush their foes at some desirable spot, where they would be caught wholly at a disadvantage, between two fires, and taken also by surprise.

In this way many would be killed, others captured, and few would be able to escape, while their horses would fall to the victors.

This plan Fire Eyes considered the best, and he at once set to work to organize his bands of braves, telling Buckskin Bill that he must go with him, and if he attempted to escape he would be killed.

Buckskin Bill coolly informed him that he had no idea of attempting to escape, and leaving his two comrades in his hands, while, if the prisoners, Ellis and Carter, were harmed, after the pledge of the Comanche chief to protect them, the Great Spirit would be very angry with him and his people.

This served to impress Fire Eyes, who at once warned his braves not to make any mistake and kill the two white captives of the Apaches.

Then the braves separated to prepare for the great battle to be fought, and the Comanche village was a scene of wild excitement, while Buckskin Bill coolly lay down in Fire Eyes's tepee and went to sleep.

CHAPTER X.

AWAITING THE ORDEAL.

WHEN Buckskin Bill awoke the sun was up, for he had been so thoroughly exhausted after all that he had passed through, that an Indian war-cry over him would not have aroused him.

Old Fire Eyes ordered his squaws to give the youth a good breakfast, which he ate with a relish.

The squaws and the youngsters in the village looked upon him with suspicion, for they had not forgotten the ship he had given them when he had escaped, and they could not understand that he had preferred to go back to his pale-face people, to living with them.

Buckskin Bill soon discovered that the squaws and children not alone had their eyes upon him, for the warriors also kept him under their observation.

The village was a large one, and securely situated against attack.

Still, a foe, whose coming was not heralded, could get in readily through the canyons, and lay it waste in a very short while.

During the day all the stock belonging to the Comanches was driven to safe places, and the best animals were selected by the braves for their use in the battle that was to be fought.

The squaws and children had a frightened look, but the warriors seemed confident of victory, though many liked not the idea of a battle so near home.

They would have preferred a lesser victory further off, where, in case of defeat, there was not a chance for the destruction of their village.

When night drew near, the separate bands of warriors mounted their horses and rode slowly out of the village.

The women and children were strangely quiet, for all seemed to realize the sad importance of the occasion.

Had the braves been starting forth on a raid, they would have been sent off with shouts of rejoicing; but this intended fight was to beat back foes, and all seemed to feel the influence of the hour.

Iron Arm and a hundred braves had been selected to close in on the rear of the Apaches, and Fire Eyes, with double that number, was ambushed in a narrow valley through which the enemy must pass.

Then there were two smaller bands, of twenty warriors each, stationed on either flank to come down and attack the Apaches, after the first stroke had been delivered.

In the rear of Fire Eyes, near the entrance to the village, was the old medicine chief, Death-Killer, with the aged men, and the boys, as a reserve.

The women and children sat in silence back in the village, awaiting the dread ordeal.

Buckskin Bill had gone with Fire Eyes, and he was much elated at the prospect of witnessing an Indian battle.

"It's dog eat dog, as father says," he muttered, and he took a position where he would be able to see all that happened.

The moon was rising when all were in position and the Comanches were all ready for the coming of their foe.

Not a sound was heard, for the horses had been muzzled, to prevent their neighing, and were back in the timber, ready for the pursuit, when the Apaches should be defeated.

The Apaches, so Buckskin Bill had stated, from what he had heard, would bring half a thousand warriors, so they would outnumber the fighting force of Fire Eyes, though the reserve, under Death-Killer, would make them about equal.

Still, Death-Killer was over three-score years, and those under him were even older, many of them, or boys ranging from ten to fifteen, so much could not be expected of them as fighters, though they might beat back a foe who did not know what they were.

Midnight passed and still no sound came to show that an enemy was approaching.

Several miles away an outpost of four braves had been stationed, and from their point of observation a view over the prairie for quite a distance could be had.

When the Apaches appeared, these braves were to at once run with all speed to communicate the intelligence to Iron Arm, Fire Eyes and the two flanking parties.

Daylight was about two hours away, when the four braves sighted a dark mass moving over the level plain.

It grew larger and larger, and was coming directly toward the point where they stood.

They were cool scouts, and they remained long enough to comment upon the probable force of the enemy, and then they darted away like the wind to communicate what they had seen.

Then every brave nerved himself for the coming struggle, and Buckskin Bill muttered:

"I guess I'll get even on the Apaches now for capturing our outfit and killing poor Pilot Pete and the other boys."

CHAPTER XI.

THE BATTLE OF THE RED-MEN.

THE Apaches came on at a brisk walk of their ponies.

They had so cleverly covered up their idea of attack, that they had no reason to suspect that they could not surprise the Comanche village.

Their band of half a hundred warriors had been hunting, to cover up their intention, and also they had gotten a supply of food for the force on the march.

These also had come upon the store-train from the settlement, capturing it, killing Pilot Pete and his carousing comrades, and making prisoners of Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter.

The two prisoners had said nothing about Buckskin Bill, and, in fact, until he had hailed them from the tree, had supposed him dead, also killed by the Apaches.

After knowing to the contrary, they gained hope, for they knew that the youth was not one to let them die if in his power to prevent it.

How he meant to save them they could not of course know, but supposed it would be by riding to the nearest fort, or the settlement, for help, and pursuing the Apaches.

As the Apaches meant to stay in that vicinity for several days, they hoped that this would be successful, and neither borderman was ready to say die until the time came when all hope was gone.

One by one the bands of Apaches came to the vicinity where those who were hunting had formed their camp; but they went into hiding until all should have arrived.

The Comanches had several times gotten the better of the Apaches, and now it was the intention of old Thunder Face, the great chief, to strike back, and to make it a death-blow.

The two captives were not treated well by their captors.

They were kept tied day and night, and little food was given them, the cruel savages looking upon it as a waste of provender to feed men that must soon die.

Upon their return to their village with Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter, together with scores of Comanche prisoners, Thunder Face and his braves meant to have a splendid time putting their captives to death.

It was just after dark that the Apaches came to a halt, some ten miles from the Comanche villages.

The ponies were watered and staked out for food and rest, and the warriors lay down to get what repose they could for a few hours.

After midnight, all were aroused, and, like a great black smoke, they went winding over the prairies toward the mountains.

As they neared the mountain passes, they be-

gan to close up, from single file to two abreast, then four, and, at last, ten riding side by side.

As there were half a thousand of them, this made a solid body of horsemen fifty deep and ten in width, all riding slowly along to dash into the Comanche village. In their midst were the two prisoners, and the mules of the train, loaded down with the plunder taken from the wagons.

About these were a guard of several redskins, who had been wounded by the attacks on the train, and whose duty it would be, in the attack on the village, to keep the pack-animals together, and not allow Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter to escape.

Little dreaming of danger, the Apache column passed the canyon, in which were hidden the warriors under Iron Arm.

A spy was watching, and hardly had the Apaches gotten three hundred yards away, when Iron Arm and his braves drew in behind them.

Spies were also watching on either flank to post the two parties there stationed, and the long drawn-out howl, in perfect imitation of a mountain wolf, warned Fire Eyes that the enemy was at hand.

A short while after the moonlight revealed the dark mass of men and ponies coming slowly on toward him.

In those days few firearms were to be found among the wild tribes of Indians, and the Comanches were 'most all of them armed with bows and arrows, and a custom which they had gotten from the Mexicans, was to also carry a spear, or lance.

When the Apaches had, therefore, advanced close up to the ambushed Comanches, the first thought they had of danger was a whirring sound, as of many hundreds of wings in the air, and a score of ponies and warriors went down under that first flight of arrows.

Loud then rung out the war-cries of the Comanches, and the Apaches, taken wholly by surprise, were for a moment completely demoralized.

Then their chief, Thunder Face, commanded a charge, and they rode hard down upon the ambushed Fire Eyes and his braves.

But, from the rocks and trees flew such a shower of arrows, with here and there the report of a revolver or rifle, that the Apaches were checked and fell back.

But then came the fire upon them, from the flanking parties, who advanced with rapid pace, and this seemed to add greater consternation, which ended in dismay when Iron Arm and his braves closed in on their rear.

Thunder Face was an able commander.

He saw that his coming was known, from some mysterious cause, and that he was prepared for.

Before him he knew that the greater force must be, to protect the village, and the lesser one in the rear.

It was a complete repulse, and all he could do was to save the men he had by a retreat, and hope for revenge at another time.

Loud then rung his orders, to gather the killed and wounded together and make a dash back the way they had come.

This they were preparing to do, when Fire Eyes charged with his force, and Iron Arm closed up with his braves, while the flankers also rushed down into the valley.

It was hoped that the whole Apache band could thus be taken.

But Thunder Face arose in his majesty just here, and decided that the dead and dying must be left, if the living wished to get away.

So he called to his braves to rally about him, and with wild yells they charged down over Iron Arm and his warriors.

The red avalanche could not be checked, and Thunder Face and two-thirds of his warriors rushed over Iron Arm and his braves.

Men went down, horses fell, arrows flew, lances were shattered, and yells, war-whoops, death-cries and the neighing of frightened horses filled the air.

It was an appalling scene, a moment of horror, and then the Apaches swept away down the mountain passes.

Comanches mounted in hot haste and pursued, and then the battle-field was left to the dead and dying.

A moan here and there from some brave Indian suffering anguish, the cry of a wounded mustang, and a wild, startling death-cry, or yell of defiance as some warrior felt life slipping away from him.

Such was the scene that the moon shone down upon, after the battle of the red-men.

CHAPTER XII.
IN SUSPENSE.

FROM his point of lookout Buckskin Bill had seen the battle, though he had not been an actor therein.

He had seen skirmishes, had beheld men die, but never had he dreamt of what an Indian battle would be, and he stood almost appalled at the sight.

Fire Eyes had called out to him to follow, when they had rushed out upon the Apaches, and he had done so.

In the heat of victory Fire Eyes had forgotten all about him.

But Buckskin Bill was thoroughly awake to the situation.

The dead and the dying were about him, horses and men lay in heaps, but he was looking for the prisoners.

As the mass of horsemen swept on, Buckskin Bill beheld a group of horses huddled together, and the moonlight revealed two mounted men.

"Ho, Dan! ho, Reuben!" shouted Buckskin Bill.

The prisoners had been unwilling spectators of the combat.

They had heard the arrows flying about them, and Reuben Carter's horse had been slightly wounded, while Dan Ellis had been slightly clipped in the shoulder.

When the Apaches turned in flight, their guards had become struck with a panic and had deserted them, while the pack-mules, in alarm, had huddled close about them.

"Pard Dan, ef we only had our arms free, we could skip now pretty lively," said Reuben Carter.

"Yas, but as it is we will get took by ther cowards, and it's a case o' out o' fryin'-pan inter fire," replied Dan.

"Yas, but we is done fer, as we can't guide our horses with our arms tied, and we'd likely starve.

"We is in a bad fix, I tells yer.

"But, Lordy! how them Apaches is a-goin', and hain't ther Comanch' everlastin'ly a-racin' 'em?"

Just then came the calling of their names by Buckskin Bill.

The two men looked at each other in a startled way, and Dan Ellis said in a whisper:

"I tell yer, pard, thet boy is dead, and thet it is his ghost a-callin' us, for it's Bill's voice."

"Leastwise it sounds so, Dan."

"Where are you, Dan, and Reuben?"

As Buckskin Bill called out, he came running toward the spot where the two prisoners were seated upon their horses among the pack-mules.

"Here we is, Pard Billy, what is left of us," replied Reuben Carter, while Dan Ellis said:

"I guess it's ther boy and not his ghost arter all."

A moment more and Buckskin Bill dashed up to them.

But there were a dozen Comanches at his back, who had not joined in the chase of the Apaches.

"Ho, Dan, and you, Reub, I'm glad to see you, and I guess you'll get free all right, so cheer up, as Fire Eyes has promised to set you free," said Bill, walking up to the two men, while the braves encircled them and looked on.

"What in thunder is you doing here, Pard Billy?" asked Dan.

"I'll tell you, pards," and the youth told all that had happened to him, since he had run away from the train when half asleep, and how he had decided, when seeing them in the hands of the Apaches and learning of the intention of Thunder Face to attack the Comanche village, to risk everything to try and save them.

"You is a noble lad, Billy Middleton, and I'll stand by you until jedgment," said Dan Ellis.

"I'm with yer, pard, fer Billy hes done more than a squar' thing fer us; but I'm afeer'd it are no use, as Comanches is all-fired liars."

"But they won't let me go, though they will you."

"I'm to stay and become a Comanche brave, you understand, and you must so tell my folks, when you get back."

"Yes, we'll tell 'em, when we gits back; but we hain't goin' and leave you here, Buckskin, and you kin jist gamble on it."

"Why not, for you can go now, or when Fire Eyes says so, and I will stay here—until I can get away," and Bill added the last in a whisper, fearing there might be some Indian listening who could understand English.

"I sees, Buckskin, and I guesses it's about ther only thing as can be did; but when is we ter be let go, for these ropes is hurtin' me considerable?"

"Fire Eyes will soon return, I guess, and then I'll have a talk with him."

"But now I'll ask these braves to take you to Death-Killer, the medicine chief, and maybe he will let them untie you."

Buckskin Bill then asked the braves standing about to take the prisoners to Death-Killer, and they did so.

But old Death-Killer was in ill humor.

He had hoped for the scalps of all of the Apaches, and was told that only about three score had been taken, with hope of a few more during the chase.

Buckskin Bill had been under his care when a captive in the village, and the old medicine chief had found him more anxious to go hunting and fishing with the Indian boys, than to accompany the squaws when gathering roots, herbs and flowers or the rude medicines he concocted.

Buckskin Bill had often felt the weight of the old man's stick, when handing him a poison root instead of one that had medicinal qualities.

Still, he had sorely missed the boy when he had escaped, and now looked daggers at him when he came and asked that the two prisoners of the Apaches should be relieved of their bonds.

The youth begged, but Death-Killer would not listen, and ended by letting Buckskin Bill feel the weight of his stick.

"Don't git the old varmint mad, Billy, for we kin stand it," urged Dan.

"Yes, for if yer hadn't 'a' dodged that blow with yer head, it would hev knocked yer silly," Reuben Carter added.

"Lordy, I don't mind that, for I got used to them when I was here long ago."

"I nearly poisoned him by mistake one day by putting some poison bark into the pot where he was making sassafras tea."

"He thought it was sassafras, and drank a swallow of it before he found it out."

"Then I caught it, I can tell you; but wait until Fire Eyes comes and he'll keep his word to me," said Buckskin Bill.

Old Death Killer had eyed him sharply while he was speaking to the two prisoners about him, though he did not know what he was saying.

But he shook his head ominously and Buckskin Bill laughed while he said:

"I hope he won't want to make me a medicine-man, as he intended to when I was here before."

"I'm a-thinkin' you won't stay ter git yer diplomy as a Injun Doctor, Billy," Dan Ellis said with a laugh.

"No, give him a dose o' his own harbs and skip," growled Reuben Carter.

There was no sleeping that night in the Indian village, for it had by no means been a battle in which the Apaches had alone suffered, for a number of Comanches had also been killed and wounded, and the women and children were howling in an appalling manner over their dead husbands and fathers.

The scalps of the slain Apaches had been taken, and every wounded Apache had been slain and also scalped, so that between sorrow and hatred for their foes, the village of the Comanches had become a perfect pandemonium.

As for the two prisoners, and Buckskin Bill, they could but await the morrow, and the return of Fire Eyes, to see what was in store for them, and they made the best of a bad situation by trying to sleep, for Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter had been taken from their homes and placed in a tepee to await the coming of the chief.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLEDGE OF A COMANCHE.

THE defeat and punishment of the Apaches, under Thunder Fire, their greatest chief, was complete and severe.

All knew that it was from having their intended attack made known to the Comanches, which enabled them to prepare for their reception and ambush them.

Once they had started in flight, they were soon rallied by their chief and faced to form a compact mass, and thus the Comanches could not break.

Several desperate charges were made by Fire Eyes upon the retreating Apaches, and the horses of the latter being fresh, while those of their foes were well worn down, and also knowing every foot of the country, the advantage was with the Comanches, in spite of the superior number of their enemies.

Then, too, the Apaches had been defeated when they had hoped for a grand victory, and were greatly demoralized.

Here and there an Apache would fall, and his comrades be unable to save him.

The Apache never scalps his dead enemy, and the Comanche could therefore, by doing so, reap a harvest of red trophies.

Having driven their foes across the river, the Comanches, leaving but a small force to trouble them, set off on their return to the village.

Their dead and wounded were brought with them, and when in the afternoon Fire Eyes and his horses appeared, there was a commingled howl of rage, sorrow, and triumph.

The victorious braves were greeted with shouts of welcome, while the dead were mourned for most boisterously and their hatred for their enemies found vent in savage cries.

"They is worse than a lunatic asylum turned loose for a picnic," said Dan Ellis.

"They is clean crazy, that's a fact."

"But now we'll know what is ter be did with us," Reuben Carter responded.

Just then Fire Eyes came toward the tepee, and Iron Arm was with him.

The latter had a wound upon his head, which Death-Killer had been dressing for him, and he was in an angry mood, as his face showed.

Buckskin Bill came out of the tepee as they approached, and said, addressing the two Chiefs:

"Did the Red Scalp speak straight, when he told the Fire Eyes that the Apaches were coming to his village?"

"Yes, the Red Scalp has a straight tongue."

"Are these the comrades of the Red Scalp?" asked Fire Eyes.

"Yes, and they suffer from the cords upon their feet and hands."

"Will the great chief not see them free, as he has promised?"

Just then, and before Fire Eyes could reply, Iron Arm spoke up quickly with:

"The Iron Arm knows these men, they are the bitter foes of the Comanches."

"Did the Iron Arm expect to find them his brothers?" asked Buckskin Bill, while Dan Ellis, who had a smattering knowledge of the Comanche tongue said:

"Reub, things looks bad for us."

"The pale-face braves are the foes of my people," Fire Eyes said, fixing his piercing gaze upon the two prisoners.

"You bet we hain't in love with yer," Dan Ellis responded, and received a warning look from Buckskin Bill, who then said:

"The pale-faces are the friends of the Comanche, for has not the Red Scalp saved their village from the Apaches?"

"But the Comanches are the foes of the pale-faces, and will not bury the tomahawk."

"The Red Scalp can stay; his life can be spared, but the two braves of his people should die," and Iron Arm glanced at Fire Eyes.

The chief seemed ill at ease.

He had given his word to Red Scalp, and yet he loved bloodshed too well to let the two men he now held in his power escape him.

What could he do but break his word.

Both Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter were recognized now, by scores of Comanche braves who gathered around them, as men who had had been the deadly foes of their tribe.

They had seen them in battle, and in the settlements, when beating back Comanches that raided the houses of the settlers.

Many a Comanche had failed to return from a hunt, or a war-trail, and the two bordermen were known to have prevented some of them from doing so.

Now they stood before them, bound, helpless, prisoners, and only the presence of their chief protected them.

The thoughts of the red-skins seemed to be fully read by Buckskin Bill and the two scouts.

The youth had acted for the best; he had taken the only course to save the two men, and he had trusted in the honor of an Indian.

Was the chief going to fail him?

It certainly looked so, and angry at the treachery of Fire Eyes, he said earnestly:

"The Red Scalp is but a boy in years."

"He is hardly old enough to be a young brave; but he came to the village of the Fire Eyes to warn his red friends of their foes coming to attack them."

"He risked his life to come, and all he asked was that his two pale-face brothers should go free."

"The Comanche braves did not capture my two brothers."

"They risked not their lives to bring them here."

"But they got them when their hands and feet were tied."

"They got with them pack-mules, Apache ponies, blankets, arms and many scalps, and the Red Scalp only asks that his two brothers be set

free, and be allowed to return to their people. The Red Scalp will stay with his red brothers.

"He has spoken."

The Fire Eyes and his warriors had not moved during the earnest appeal of the youth.

Now, when he finished, the chief was about to speak, when Dan Ellis said:

"Pard Billy, don't make 'em mad with you, for you've done your duty to us, and no mistake."

"Yes, let 'em kill us, fer I hain't heerd o' a man hev'ing two times ter die," Reuben Carter replied.

The chief knew not what was said; but he turned to Buckskin Bill and said sternly:

"The pale-face braves are the foes of my people."

"Their hands are red with the blood of my braves."

"They must die."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DEATH GANTLET.

At the words of Fire Eyes Buckskin Bill was about to make some hasty reply when Dan Ellis said quickly:

"Don't make it wuss for us, Billy."

The youth checked himself, and then he replied:

"Oh, my pards! if I had only suspected this I would have acted differently."

"But I believed the chief would keep his word."

"You has got your idee of Injuns from books, Billy, and it's strange thet yer hev, as yer was raised among 'em."

"No, no, Injuns is born liars and cut-throats—it's the'r religin," Reuben Carter said.

Angry at the talking of the scouts, which he did not understand, Fire Eyes called to Buckskin Bill to follow him, and left seven men to see to the safety of the prisoners, until they were needed for the sacrifice.

Without a word Buckskin Bill obeyed.

His heart was full of trouble, but his brain was busy plotting.

He would do all in his power to save the two men.

Before going to the tepees of the chief he begged him again to let the scouts go.

But Fire Eyes was firm.

Then the youth tried the cupidity of the man, and promised him a vast quantity of presents, if he would release them.

The chief would not believe the youth, when he promised to go to the settlements and return with them.

"The pale-face foes of my people must die," he said over and over again.

Buckskin Bill was almost in despair.

Just then old Death-Killer came to the tepee of Fire Eyes.

The Death-Killer held great power.

He was the ruler of the village, as it were, while Fire Eyes was the chief of the warriors.

Death-Killer's long hair was snow-white, and this added to his influence among his people.

He was not much over threescore, but yet his form was bent, his limbs feeble and his voice shaky.

"The Death-Killer is welcome," said Fire Eyes, rising as the old medicine chief entered.

"The Fire Eyes is a great brave."

"He has gained a great victory over the enemies of his people," said the aged medicine-man.

"The Apaches fled like leaves before the wind from my braves," boastfully replied the Fire Eyes.

"And the Fire Eyes took two prisoners from the Apaches?" said Death-Killer.

"I thought that was what old Roots and Herbs was coming to," muttered Buckskin Bill.

"Yes; the two pale-faces are foes to my people."

"They should die."

"They will die—the Fire Eyes has spoken," was the response.

"And the Red Scalp?"

"Does the great medicine chief, Death-Killer, wish the Red Scalp in his tepee?" And the Fire Eyes was in hopes of a negative reply, for he wished the youth for his especial use.

"The Fire Eyes has spoken."

"The Death-Killer wishes the Red Scalp, for his limbs are growing feeble."

Buckskin Bill groaned.

He remembered the stick of the old medicine chief, and that as an herb and root gatherer his lot had not been a happy one.

He had to go into the woods with the old man, dig for roots, hunt for herbs, and carry them all

to him to pass upon as "good medicine" or "bad medicine," and, kept constantly under Death-Killer's eye, he would have little chance to get off with the young braves fishing and hunting.

But, with the threats to kill Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter staring him in the face, he dared not say anything.

"The Death-Killer can have the Red Scalp."

"Let him be taken to the medicine tepee and bound until the two pale-faces have died."

Five minutes after Buckskin Bill was bound hand and foot, and was lying upon a buffalo-rope in the large tepee of the old medicine chief, to be thus kept until after Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter had been put to death.

From that moment, when thrown bound into the medicine tepee, Buckskin did not close his eyes, until he heard the gathering of the red-skins the next afternoon for the grand entertainment, to them, of killing two pale-face prisoners.

The howling of the warriors in the dances, the moaning and crying of the squaws and children who had lost husbands and parents, made the village akin to a lunatic asylum during the long hours of the night.

Buckskin Bill felt that he could do nothing to save his comrades.

Young and hopeful, he still hoped that Fire Eyes would keep his word and let them go.

But in this hope Dan Ellis and Reuben Carter did not enter.

They well understood Indian character, and resigned themselves to their fate.

There was one thing about Dan Ellis which his captors had not taken into consideration.

That was his remarkably small hands and feet.

Possessed of hands and feet that might be envied by a woman, in spite of his tall and muscular form, he had managed to slip them from the bonds whenever he was not under the eye of his captors, and he had planned with Reuben Carter, while they were prisoners to the Apaches, to free him, and then the two would make an effort to escape.

When in the tepee in the Indian village, Dan Ellis had loosened the bonds of Carter, and greatly relieved the pain he had been suffering from having them so tightly tied.

As for himself, his own limbs had not swollen, and, freed of his bonds, when not watched, he had kept the blood circulating freely in his limbs.

Had they had a longer time in the Comanche camp, the two daring men might have gotten a chance to escape; but the night passed away without their daring to make the attempt, and the next morning they were told that they were to do it.

"It's all up with us, Pard Reuben; but I'm durned ef I don't surprise them red varmints at ther last minute and take Injun comp'ny along with us out o' ther world, and I only wishes you was in as good trim as I be."

But Reuben Carter was not.

He could not free himself of his bonds as Ellis could, and his limbs were greatly swollen and painful.

He was a man over fifty, while Ellis was barely thirty; but he said:

"Ef I gits ther chance ter kill, I'll j'ine yer, Pard Dan."

Thus they sat through the day, wondering what mode of cruelty the red-skins would find to kill them by.

Toward the sunset hour they saw the Indians all assembling together in the open space in the village, and forming two long lines, a hundred yards apart.

"Pard, we is ter run ther gantlet fer our lives," said Dan coolly.

"Then that kills me, as I hain't able ter run far or fast; but you kin, Dan, and you is deer-footed as I knows, and maybe you won't surprise 'em."

"Well, I'm a-gittin' old, and I guesses my time has come; but you is young and kin fight fer life, pard—yes, it is ter be ther death gantlet, Dan, as I sees, and it means sart'n death ter me," and the old borderman sadly watched the preparations of the red-skins for the deadly race for life.

CHAPTER XV.

RUN DOWN.

WHEN the warrior guard came for the two prisoners, Reuben Carter did not have to feign being lame, for it really pained him to walk.

But Dan Ellis limped on purpose and suffered no pain.

The eyes of the two men took in the situation at a glance.

They saw the Indians divided in two lines, extending several hundred yards in the broad space between the tepees.

They were some two hundred feet apart, and there were chiefs, warriors, squaws and children.

There were also innumerable dogs, gaunt, hungry-looking animals, which were unmercifully kicked whenever they came within reach of a foot, whether it belonged to a warrior, a squaw or a child.

At a distance beyond the line stood a group, among whom were Fire Eyes, Death-Killer and Iron Arm, and toward these the prisoners were led, and reaching there they beheld Buckskin Bill in the background, and he was also securely bound, as they were.

"Lordy, pard, I believe they is going to make Billy run, too," said Dan Ellis.

Reuben Carter shook his head sadly and said:

"They has no mercy; boy or man it's all the same to them."

At the other end of the line, some four hundred yards from the group, which was to be the starting point, a mustang was staked out with a short lariat.

This animal was to be the goal to be reached, and the prisoner who could get to him, mount, and ride away, was to be allowed to go unmolested.

This was what Fire Eyes had considered being generous, although the mustang had no saddle nor bridle, and the man that should reach him would be unarmed and without food.

Had he considered it possible for either of the prisoners to reach the mustang, he would never have shown such generosity.

The prisoners were led to the group, and told what they were to do, while a band of half a hundred young bucks, armed with knives, stood near to give chase and cut them to pieces, should they catch them.

Their bonds were then taken off, and poor Reuben Carter stamped his feet, as though trying to get up a circulation, with a hope of making the run.

But the pain he suffered convinced him that he was doomed.

"Billy, you has acted nobly by us, but you has got inter a fix yerself by it."

"I'm gittin' old, and I'm weak and sufferin' so I has got ter go under, so I says good-by, lad, and ef ther time do come when yer kin avenge me, don't let it slip."

"Good-by, Dan, and luck ter yer, pard, and I believes yer'll hev it."

"Ef yer gits through don't fergit ter raise Comanche hair fer me now and then, and remember whar yer left Buckskin Billy."

"Good-by."

The voice of the old borderman was firm as he spoke, while Dan Ellis was choked up and he could not at first reply.

But then he said:

"I'll git thar, Reuben, pard, and you'll not be forgotten when I gits on ther trail o' red-skins."

"Good-by, pard," and the young scout turned and limped into line, while Buckskin Bill's eyes were riveted upon them with a look of deepest pity and sorrow blended.

In his heart was sympathy for those two brave men whom he had tried so hard to save, while his brain was wild with thoughts of revenge against the treacherous Comanches.

As Fire Eyes gave the word to go, a cry broke from the lips of Dan Ellis, and he shot away like an arrow from a bow.

He knew that Reuben Carter must die, that he had no power to save him, and to remain and perish with him would be utter madness, and so he made up his mind to strain every nerve to escape.

Buckskin Bill was amazed to see him almost fly as he did, although he knew that Dan was said to often outrun an ordinary mustang in a race.

The Indians were also surprised, and upon the trails of the two, like a pack of wolves, bounded the half a hundred braves, armed with knives, while at their heels ran a great crowd of hungry dogs, joining in the sport, as it was to them and the Comanches.

After seeing Dan Ellis bound away with such tremendous speed, Buckskin Bill, with a sinking heart, turned his gaze upon Reuben Carter.

He was struggling along, doing his best in the mad fight for life.

But close upon his heels came the pack of red-skins and dogs, and seeing that he was to be overtaken, the brave borderman turned and faced them.

Then, like a lion at bay he sprung, unarmed as he was, upon them, and met his fate fearlessly.

There were a few knife-thrusts, a yelping of dogs, yelling of Indians, and the life of poor Reuben Carter had ended, while one young brave shook aloft the gory scalp as a trophy of his bravery.

CHAPTER XVI.

A SURPRISE.

THE catching up with unfortunate Reuben Carter, and his tragic death at the cruel hands of his red-skin pursuers, momentarily took the gaze of the Indians, and of Buckskin Bill, from Dan Ellis.

The scout was, as has been stated, a tall, splendidly-formed man.

Over six feet in height, he was possessed of wonderful strength and endurance, while his speed as a runner had been the admiration of his comrades, who had bestowed upon him the name of Deerfoot Dan.

Brave, and yet clinging to life with the tenacity of a young man with the world before him, Dan was determined to make a grand struggle.

He knew that the Comanches had swift runners in their tribe, braves whose incentive to kill was as great as his incentive to escape them.

Believed to be lame from his having been wounded, he yet was in perfect condition, and went off like a rocket on his run.

There were two-thirds of the braves who started in chase of the two men, who kept on after him, only a dozen or so throwing themselves upon poor Carter.

The fleetest runners had expected more of Dan Ellis, and so they had him in their eye.

From his very first jump at the start, he began to drop them behind, and when Buckskin Bill was able to turn his staring eyes from the scene of Reuben Carter's death, a cry of joy almost broke from his lips as he saw Dan thirty paces ahead of his nearest pursuer.

And with each bound the flying scout gained, while the Indians were fairly dazed with amazement.

On, on, flew the borderman, going two feet to the one of his pursuers, and seemingly without an effort.

But Dan Ellis knew his danger, and he was straining every nerve.

The mustang he knew might be frightened at his rapid approach and, with a spring, drag up the rope peg and dash away.

Then the pack of dogs were beginning to find out who it was the red-skins were chasing, and they separated themselves from their masters and ran on ahead after the fugitive.

Of course Dan Ellis could not expect to distance the hungry pack, were the chase a long one; but when he heard them open in full cry he knew that he must gain the mustang before they could catch him, or be pulled down by them.

Maddened by this thought he used still greater exertion and for a short while fairly gained on the dogs.

But the pace was too hard a one to last long, and the dogs began to creep upon him.

This sport seemed to delight the red-skins immensely.

They had not expected their hungry canines to join in the chase, and it would be a novel sensation to see a pale-face pulled down and worried to death by the savage pack.

The pursuing braves however would prefer to kill with their knives, rather than have the fugitive die under the teeth of the dogs, and they quickened their pace.

The mustang was now but a short fifty yards away, the dogs about the same distance behind the fugitive.

As he fairly flew along Dan Ellis spied a lance lying in his path.

A quick stoop and he had grasped it, and a moment after he was within a few feet of the mustang.

The frightened animal made a bound, and yet he was not quick enough, for the stake was seized and dragged up, and, with a mighty bound the daring man was upon the back of the mustang.

Just at that moment the leading dog was within reach, and by a skillful movement Dan Ellis caught him fairly upon the sharp-pointed lance.

Then away darted the mustang, the fleet runner upon his back, and out of the village he went like the wind.

The braves gave a yell of rage and disappointment, the women and children screamed,

and away sped a hundred warriors to mount in hot haste and pursue.

But down the steep mountain-side at a run went the sure-footed mustang, the rider guiding him with the lance, and when he reached the valley the nearest horseman was a quarter of a mile behind him.

One long, loud, exultant yell broke from the lips of Dan Ellis, and he urged his pony on at full speed.

Then he glanced back and saw a long string of horsemen in pursuit.

In the valley the shadows were increasing, though the mountain-tops were yet rosy with the last rays of the sun which had gone down.

"I will escape them—they can never take me now, for within ten minutes it will be dark and I am a long way ahead."

So said the brave rider, and his words were soon proven to be warranted, as when the Indians reached the valley, between the dark shadows from the hills, the timber and canyons, with the prairie stretching away on one side, they knew not which way the fugitive had gone.

The dogs, too, though they had pursued the white man, would not chase the mustang; or the fatal thrust one of their number had received had proven a wholesome lesson, for they no longer were in chase.

It was too dark for the red-skins to follow the trail, and listening they heard no sound of hoofs, when at last the pursuing party had gathered together in the valley.

The white man had been promised his life if he could run the gantlet in safety, and yet, having done so, the Comanches would have caught him if they could, and tried some other game for their amusement in which the chances of success were more in their favor.

At last, with saddened hearts they returned to the village, compelled to give up the chase, for, when the morning came it would be useless to follow the trail of the daring scout, with his half-score hours' start of them.

CHAPTER XVII.

DEATH-KILLER'S PROTEGE.

THE old medicine chief of the Comanches had won his name—as is customary with Indian nomenclature from some peculiarity of the one named—from the fact that he defied death in curing sick red-skins.

The Indians are natural physicians and surgeons, and one who sets himself up among a tribe as a medicine-man is compelled to be versed in the uses of plants, herbs, roots and flowers, for the cure of diseases and the healing of wounds.

Either by accident, luck or real knowledge, old Death-Killer had won fame as a medicine-man, and his white hair added to the respect with which he was regarded by his people.

His tepee was a large one, and remarkably odd-looking in appearance, for it was a blending of an Indian curiosity-shop, a witch's retreat and an apothecary shop.

There were dried herbs and wild flowers, barks of various trees, roots and plants in abundance, with clay pots to boil them to extract the juices.

Then there were the skulls and bones of human beings and animals, the former being the remains of pale-faces, for not even an Apache would old Death-Killer allow in his tepee after he was dead.

Relics of the chase, bearskins, buffalo-ropes, dressed deer-heads and the plumage of birds ornamented the place, while weapons of all kinds were also there.

Without the tepee was covered with various cabalistic signs, painted in red, yellow and black colors.

Old Death-Killer had his little tepee in the rear, opening into the large one, and therein he slept, using the other for laboratory, office, pow-wow hall and store-room.

As Buckskin Bill was to become once more the *protege* of Death-Killer after the sad death of Reuben Carter and the escape of Dan Ellis, he was turned over to the old medicine chief by Fire Eyes, who told him that any attempt to escape on his part would end in his being burned to death.

With this horrible threat Buckskin Bill was freed of his bonds and was given a bear-robe in the large tepee of the medicine chief, which was filled with the scent of a dozen different concoctions.

But Buckskin Bill had been there before, his quarters having then been in the same place.

As if not caring for the fate of Carter and escape of Dan Ellis, but perfectly satisfied to remain in the Comanche village, Buckskin Bill

set to work with a cheerfulness that pleased old Death-Killer, and disarmed, in a measure, suspicion of him, though there was a nightly and daily watch placed upon him which Fire Eyes and the medicine chief did not intend he should know about.

The moment that Buckskin Bill beheld Reuben Carter die as he did, he raised his eyes toward Heaven, and a vow passed his lips that he would avenge that appalling act upon the old scout.

He knew that there was but one way to get along in the Indian village, and that was to enter into their customs at once, and to seem to take his situation as though he liked it.

Since his former captivity among the Comanches he had learned much, and he did all in his power to make himself useful.

That they were suspicious of him he knew, as also that he was well watched, for he quickly discovered who his watchers were.

To the old medicine chief he tried to make himself most useful, hoping to win his gratitude at least.

But the red-skin has little gratitude.

He takes all favors shown him as a matter of course, and try as he might, Buckskin Bill could not win more than a mumbled word from Death-Killer.

For his own sake the youth entered into the work of the medicine-man, for there were certain things he was anxious to find out.

He wished to know an herb that would produce a deep sleep for some hours, and he was sure that Death-Killer understood the value of all of his medicines.

He helped the old chief to boil the herbs, roots and flowers, dried the plants, found out what was good about them and that which was bad, and before long was fully as conversant with the medicinal properties of what nature provided in the forests for its children as was Death-Killer himself.

Thus several months passed away, and the red-skins had begun to feel that Buckskin Bill was contented with his lot.

This was what he wished, and to keep himself up to the mark in athletic strength and endurance, he would wrestle with the Indian youths, run races with them, practice bow and arrow shooting, for he had no firearms, and also become expert in the use of the Comanche lance.

He also entered into their sports on horseback, and, though always considered a good rider in the settlement, he soon found out that the Indians could teach him a great deal about riding which he had never believed possible.

Since the defeat of the Apaches the Comanches had been keeping very close to their village, and in many ways had strengthened their stronghold, imitating the whites and making it almost a fort.

Then, too, they had put out advance posts, from quarters where danger might be expected, and these were relieved from duty every morning.

Fire Eyes also encouraged the boys of the tribe in the use of weapons, and hoped to make of them a fair home guard in case of another attack.

News came to the village, now and then, from Indian spies, that the settlement was increasing in numbers, that trains were running oftener across the plains and mountains, and of several important raids which the Apaches had made against the whites.

Of course Buckskin Bill heard of these rumors, but showed no outward interest in them.

Often he thought of making an attempt to escape; but he dreaded failure, and the fearful threat of Fire Eyes, to burn him at the stake if he did make the effort, deterred him until he felt sure of success.

One night there was a grand pow-wow in the Council Tepee, and Buckskin Billy tried hard to find out what was going on.

But this he could not do, and he lay awake until Old Death-Killer came in and went to bed.

The next morning Billy discovered that Fire Eyes, with a hundred picked warriors, had left the village during the night.

Day after day he longed for their return, that he might learn whither they had gone, and what devilry they had been committing, and one afternoon he was delighted to see them returning, yet dreading what they might bring to prove that they had been upon a successful raid into the settlements.

As they came into the village, yelling like demons, Buckskin Bill knew that they had met with success, and soon he saw unbounded proof in numerous mules which had belonged to a train, the animals being loaded down with booty taken from the wagons.

But, worst of all, there were several prisoners, and among them a little golden-haired, blue-eyed girl hardly more than eight years of age. "Poor little girl! poor men," murmured Buckskin Bill, and he walked away to the Medicine Tepee, his heart bleeding for the captives.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE MEETING.

THE story of the raid of Fire Eyes and his warriors, soon became known through the Comanche village.

They had heard of a train that was going across the plains to the settlements, and with it were several settlers and their families.

The Comanches had laid in ambush for the train and attacked it at an unguarded moment.

But though they had captured it, and many prisoners, a party of cavalry the next day had surprised them and they had only managed to bring off their booty, which they had placed upon the captured mules, and three prisoners, two of them teamsters, and one a little girl.

The Comanches were happy over their partial success, and furious because they had not saved all, while they had to mourn the loss of some of their best warriors, and yet could get a balm for their sorrows in killing two of their captives, for the little girl was to be raised in the Indian camp as the adopted child of Fire Eyes.

The two men seemed to feel there was no hope for themselves as to their fate; but, brave as they were the cruel tortures of the Comanches in putting them to death caused them to fill the air with wild shrieks of anguish, and Buckskin Bill, who had crept away to his buffalo-robe in the tepee, covered his ears with his hands to shut out the appalling sounds.

It was a long time before Buckskin Bill got an opportunity to speak with the little captive, for he kept away from her.

This the Indians noticed, and it pleased them to see that he did not seem to care for her, and Fire Eyes confidentially remarked to Death-Killer:

"The Red Scalp is a good Comanche. He will be a great chief some day."

But one day an opportunity offered for Buckskin Bill to speak to the little captive.

Her civilized attire had been changed for Indian toggery, and she was seated upon the banks of a small brook fishing, when Buckskin Bill, who was gathering herbs, with Death-Killer, lying in the shade not far distant, spied her.

She looked up as a buckskin-clad form approached her, believing it to be an Indian, and she said in her childish way, as she looked curiously at him:

"It's a red-headed Indian."

"No, I am not an Indian, little girl, but white like yourself, and also a captive," said Buckskin Bill.

"Ah! I'm so glad! We'll be good friends, won't us, for I have no one here I care for." Buckskin Bill warned her to sit down and keep quiet, and seating himself near her, he asked:

"What is your name?"

"Frances Willard, but they call me Frankie at home, while these horrid Indians call me Snow Bird."

"It's a pretty name for an Indian girl, but I like to be called Frankie."

"And where did you live?"

"In Texas, sir, and we were going to the Indian Territory, where my father was to teach school, when the Indians attacked our train."

"Were your parents killed?"

"No, sir; for the soldiers came and run the Indians off; but the big chief, my Indian father, carried me with him, although I screamed and scratched him all I could."

"Well, Frankie, I don't dare talk to you; but I wish you to feel I intend to escape from here and take you with me."

"It may be days, weeks, and perhaps months; but I shall get away and you shall go too."

"Be careful not to let any one know that you have talked to me, for they would kill us both; but don't fret, for I will take you back to your parents."

"Ah! if you only could," and the little girl's eyes were filled with tears, while her lips quivered.

"They beat me here when I am not bad, and I have to work so hard."

"I had some fishing-lines in my pocket when they caught me, and so I thought I'd run down here to the brook and catch some fish; but they may beat me for it, although I've caught a whole string."

"See here!"

She held up the string of fish with pride, and then as Buckskin Bill started to go, she asked:

"What is your name?"

"The Indians call me Red Scalp."

"What an ugly name!"

"It's because you are red-headed, I guess."

"But what's the name your parents gave you?"

"William Middleton."

"I'll call you Mister Willie."

"No, call me Bill—Buckskin Bill—for that is what they called me at school."

"But now I must go, but remember I will save you."

"I won't forget it."

"Good-by, Frankie."

"Good-by, Buckskin Bill," was the reply, and the girl continued her fishing, while Buckskin Bill stole softly away and went on with his work, happy at having had a talk with the pretty little girl captive.

"If I can only save her!" he mused.

"And I will!" he firmly added a moment after.

CHAPTER XIX. IN MASQUERADE.

THE more Buckskin Bill looked into matters, the more he discovered that he was constantly watched.

He was glad to know that his little talk with Frankie Willard had escaped the watchful eyes kept upon him, and he came to the conclusion that if he could escape himself, he could also rescue her.

How to accomplish this was what puzzled his brain continually.

He thought out a hundred plans, and had to give them up.

One of his duties was to look after the horses of the old medicine chief.

For some reason, perhaps to watch his own white hair, Death-Killer would own nothing but a white mustang, and the score of animals which belonged to him were all fine ones, and were as white as snow.

Buckskin Bill suddenly took a deeper interest in his care of these white mustangs.

He would care for them far more thoroughly than was his wont, and he seemed to take pride in combing out, with a comb of his own manufacture, their long manes and tails.

The fact was, that their manes and tails had suggested an idea of escape to the youth.

In all the time that he was caring for these mustangs, he was robbing them, hair by hair, of their tails.

These hairs were securely hidden away, and at different times, when he could, Buckskin Bill worked on something which at last developed into a rude wig.

This was the foundation of his last plot to escape, and the reader will discover that it was a good one, though a desperate one.

Having completed his wig, Buckskin Bill began to see what the chances were of a talk with little Frankie.

It took him weeks to manage this, but at last he succeeded, and the result was that the next day the child was taken ill.

She had begun to understand and speak the Comanche tongue passably well, and she told the chief, Fire Eyes, and his wife that she was suffering great pain.

They were anxious about the little captive, for they did not wish to lose her, and so old Death-Killer was called in.

He looked as wise as an owl, gave the child some of his medicines, and it had no beneficial effect.

As Frankie seemed to grow worse, the old medicine chief said he would take her to his tepee that night and try other things to cure her, for that was the custom of the Comanches, to take an invalid to the Medicine Lodge and endeavor by their rude methods to drive off disease.

Old Death-Killer departed for his tepee to make all arrangements, and he found that Buckskin Bill had his supper ready for him.

The old medicine chief was hungry, and he gorged himself so that he grew sleepy and fell back upon the buffalo-robe on which he had been sitting.

Then Buckskin Bill rose quickly, and dragged Death-Killer into his little tepee adjoining.

From his body then were taken his picturesque costume and ornaments of bears' claws, beads, eagle-bones, and scalps, and it took Buckskin Bill a very short while to rig up in them.

Out from its hiding-place then came the white horse-hair wig, after which he reddened his face with paint.

The wig was a good fit, and with hands also

reddened, body bent over, and the staff of the medicine chief, the daring youth looked the very medicine chief himself.

Lying half-naked upon his couch of skins, sleeping securely under an herb narcotic which Buckskin Bill had placed in his supper, Death-Killer was no longer dangerous.

Having put the fire nearly out, so as to have but a dim light in the large tepee, Buckskin Bill started on his perilous mission.

The walk and movements of the old medicine chief he had studied perfectly, and his voice he had practiced until he could imitate it to perfection.

The night was dark, and as the Comanches were wont to retire early the camp-fires were already burning low.

A misty rain was beginning to fall, and a chill wind that was uncomfortable was sweeping through the village.

Across the village the young borderman wended his way, keeping up the gait and perfect appearance of the old medicine chief, and straight to the group of tepees which belonged to Fire Eyes and his family he went.

The sick child had been left to the care of one of the squaws in one of the tepees, and to it the disguised youth made his way.

"How feels the Snow Bird now?" he asked, as he drew aside the flaps of the tepee and entered, while the squaw half arose from her bed of skins.

The words seemed to arouse the child and she moaned pitifully.

"The medicine chief will take the Snow Bird to his tepee."

"Let the Antelope come to the medicine lodge when the sun shines over the mountain and see if the Snow Bird is not better."

So saying, the youth wrapped the little captive carefully up in robes, and taking her in his arms bore her from the tepee, while the squaw, glad to get rid of her charge, dropped back on her couch again and slept soundly, thinking nothing of the affair, as it was the custom of the Indian medicine-men to have their way with all invalids.

Back to the Medicine Lodge went the youth, clinging fast to his burden, while the rain began to fall more rapidly and the chill wind to blow more fiercely.

CHAPTER XX. A BOLD DEED.

THE heavy flaps of the large Medicine Tepee had hardly shut Buckskin Bill from view, when he gently laid the slender form down upon a couch of skins, which the old medicine chief had for invalid Indians.

Then he made a rapid circuit of the tepee, looking in all places where a form could be concealed, and entering the quarters adjoining, found Death-Killer sleeping soundly.

"He ate so much he got more than I intended."

"But it won't kill him," muttered Buckskin Bill.

Then he went outside and made a rapid circuit of the two tepees.

Not a soul was visible. Returning to the Medicine Lodge, he said, in a whisper:

"Frankie!"

"Well, Buckskin Bill?"

"How do you feel?"

"Splendid."

"You played your part well."

"And so did you, for at first I really thought you were that horrid old medicine chief."

"But what are you going to do now?"

"Escape."

"Oh! how glad I will be."

He hastily collected some traps together, which he had been collecting for weeks, and tied all in a bundle, which he strapped upon his back.

"Here, Frankie, you carry the provision-bag and this bow and arrows, and I have the old chief's rifle, revolver and knife."

"Now, come on, and keep close behind me."

They left the tepee silently, and wended their way toward the nearest timber, where they had shelter from any one who might be moving about the village.

But the rain was falling, and the chill wind blowing, so Buckskin Bill had little fear of seeing any one, unless it was a party returning from a hunting expedition, or some of the outposts coming in for some reason.

The Comanches had a dozen corrals for their ponies, and over each one was a guard; but the desire of the old medicine chief to keep his mustangs aloof from the others, had worked greatly in the favor of Buckskin Bill's daring project, for there was no watch kept on them.

Reaching the corral, Buckskin Bill deposited

his bundle, and then went among the herd, picking out three of the animals which he knew to be the best ones, and telling them in the intense darkness by having plaited their manes so that he should know them on just such an occasion.

Bridles, saddles and stake-ropes he had always hidden away, and these were quickly put upon two of the mustangs, while the bundle was firmly strapped upon the third.

"Now, Frankie, let me put you on this pony, and you must ride like a boy, for Indians don't have any side-saddles," said Buckskin Bill, and he raised the little girl to the back of the pony.

Then he mounted, and with Frankie following close behind, and the third mustang leading, he started down toward the valley.

Frankie could hardly restrain herself with joy, for she thought all danger was over; but Buckskin Bill whispered to her that they had an outpost of three red-skins to pass before they were free of the Indian lines, and after that it was a long, hard ride to the settlement. About two miles from the camp Buckskin Bill threw rein and asked Frankie to hold his mustang and wait for him there.

Then, with the bow and arrows, and a revolver, he crept cautiously forward.

The trail led through a rocky pass, and at the other end of it the youth knew that the Indian sentinel was stationed, while, up a canyon, half a hundred yards away, was the camp of the others.

The patter of the rain, and the howling of the wind, were in his favor to drown all sound, and yet he moved with the greatest caution.

He was within ten paces of the sentinel, who, unlike many white soldiers, when no enemy is supposed to be near, was not shirking his duty, but was standing upright upon the rock, his back toward the rain-storm, and his face turned toward the point from whence danger was to be looked for.

"I hate to shoot him in the back," said the boy, with a desire to have a foe face him.

But then he thought of poor Reuben Carter, the two teamsters, the cruel raids of the Comanches, the pretty little captive Frankie, and last of himself, and the fearful fate that awaited him if he was taken back to the village.

Drawing the arrow well back and taking deliberate aim, Buckskin Bill sent the fatal shaft flying upon its errand.

With a stifled cry the Indian sprang into the air and fell heavily, rolling down the rocks into the trail.

Buckskin Bill was by his side in an instant, his hand upon his throat, but the sentinel was off duty forever.

Fearful that his cry might have alarmed his comrades up the canyon, the youth waited, crouching, revolver in hand, to see if they appeared.

But, lucky for them was it that they did not, the wind and rain having prevented the sound reaching them.

Feeling assured that all was quiet up the canyon, he dragged the body out of sight and then returned to the hiding-place off the trail where he had left Frankie, and mounting quickly, said:

"I guess it's all right now, Frankie."

"Did you see the sentinels?"

"Yes, but they won't see us—come."

He led the way down the pass, and glanced at the clump of bushes that hid the dead warrior as he went by.

But they passed through in safety and soon after reaching the prairie set out at a rapid gallop, the fugitives riding side by side, and the third horse leading willingly.

After pressing on for several hours Buckskin Bill said:

"I guess we'll give the ponies a rest now, for by the time the Indians find out we have escaped, we will be forty miles away from the village."

"Oh, Buckskin Bill! you are a great man," cried Frankie in delight, and from that moment Buckskin Bill became her hero of heroes.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUT'S STORY.

It is now time to return to Dan Ellis, after his magnificent escape from the Comanches.

It was, as the reader will remember, nearly sunset, when his desperate race for life began, and so darkness came to his aid before he had ridden very far, and forced the Indians to give up pursuit of him.

The animal which had been placed as a bait, at the end of the goal, was a good one, far better than the red-skins would have selected had

they supposed it possible that either of their prisoners could escape in the Death Chase.

Finding out that he had a good mustang under him, Dan Ellis pressed rapidly on.

He was most anxious to put as great distance as possible between the Comanches and himself in the shortest possible time.

He knew, too, that he had no weapons, other than the lance he carried, no food, and was in desperately bad circumstances for a couple of hundred miles' flight.

But he did not despair, and so held on his way at a canter.

He had strained himself in his terrific exertions to reach the horse before the pack of dogs should catch him, for the chasing red-skins he knew he could readily distance.

This strain began to tell upon him, and when he dismounted toward midnight, he could hardly walk.

This stiffness increased upon him and the next day his whole frame was racked with pain.

But he held on his way, resting his pony when he dared, and giving the animal all the grazing and water he wanted.

As for himself water was all he could get, as he could not eat grass, and hunger began to tell upon him, for the Indians had been very stingy in giving him food the few days he had been their captive.

When night came his pony was pretty well fagged out, and he was almost completely so.

He had nothing to light a fire with, no blanket to wrap about him to keep off the chilly winds, and so he had to make a bed of leaves, like a wild animal, and keep warm as best he could.

After several hours of rest, such as it was, he mounted his pony, which had fared much better, and set off once more on his way to the settlements.

Thus the day passed and another night came.

Knowing that he was too stiff and sore to mount if he dismounted, he remained upon his mustang, which he kept slowly walking on his way through the night.

Before day dawned the animal was gaunt and well-nigh used up, but his rider was in a worse condition and felt that he could not stand it much longer.

Just then his eyes fell upon a white object far off over the prairies.

It was the tilt of a "prairie schooner," and others met his eyes also.

"I am saved," he murmured, and he pushed his pony forward at his best gait.

An hour more and he rode up to a wagon-train crossing the prairie, and bound for the settlements.

He could barely say "I've escaped from Injuns—nearly starved—used up dead sart'in."

Then he fell from his horse.

Tenderly he was taken up and cared for, and the next day when the train pulled into the settlement he was delirious with fever.

All there knew him as Dan Ellis, one of the guards of the store train of Hal Rice.

What did it mean? The train should have returned several days before.

Why had it not? All that poor Dan Ellis could say was:

"They are after me! I must run for it!"

Thus did he rave in his delirium.

The people of the train told of his words to them.

And then a great fear ran through the settlement.

Hal Rice thought of his loss of wagons, mules and provisions.

But Mr. Middleton and others thought of those dear to them.

Pilot Pete, Reuben Carter, Buckskin Bill and the others.

What had become of them?

No one could tell; but a scouting-party was at once organized and went off on the trail.

They soon found the charred remains of the wagons, the bones of dead men, which the wolves had picked clean.

Who they were they could not tell.

Dan Ellis had escaped, and the bones scattered about accounted for others; but two known to have been with the train were missing.

Had they escaped, or been carried off by the Indians as captives?

And which were they?

These questions but one man could answer, and he was delirious with fever and might die.

Back to the settlement rode the party, under Mr. Middleton, and their sad story was told.

Dan Ellis still lay in the same condition, wild with delirium.

Most tenderly he was cared for, until at last

the fever burned itself out, and his strong frame and constitution proved victorious over the severe attack.

At last he was able to talk, and his story was told.

He did not speak unkindly of Pilot Pete, and those who had caroused with him, but he gave all to understand that but for the spree which the guide had begun in the town, the sad tragedy would not have occurred.

He told how Reuben Carter, Buckskin Bill and himself, utterly worn out, had been forced to yield to Pilot Pete and the others to watch the train and what had followed.

Buckskin Bill's story of escape, his having been up a tree over the heads of the camping Apaches, and his brave effort to rescue Carter and himself, he made known.

Reuben Carter's sad fate was also told, and how Buckskin Bill was a prisoner in the camp of the Comanches.

A cheer arose at this, from all who heard it, and loud cries were heard to form a rescue-party.

But Dan Ellis said:

"We hain't got no thousand men, pards, ter send to thet camp, and it would take thet many to git thar in fightin' style."

"Then thar hain't two hundred sogers on thet border ter help us, so we kin do nutthin'."

"But you jist let Buckskin Bill alone."

"He hain't no fool, and he were born with his eyes open."

"He hev cut his teeth and durn me if yer don't see him a-pilin' inter thet settlement some fine mornin', chipper as yer please."

"They likes thet boy, and he jist makes 'em believe he loves 'em ter death."

"They knows he saved 'em from thet Apaches, and they wants him fer a brave among 'em, and thet old medicine chief hev adopted him."

"But fer all that, Buckskin Bill don't like rusticiatin' among Comanches, and ye'll see him afore long, or my name hain't Dan Ellis."

This assurance of the scout gave renewed hope, and daily did the settlers hope and look for the return of the brave youth they knew to be the captive of cruel red-skins.

Then one day, like an electric thrill, there ran from cabin to cabin the thrilling words:

"Buckskin Bill has returned."

CHAPTER XXII.

DAN ELLIS'S DEATH-ROLL.

It was a long time before Dan Ellis was able to get about, and longer still before he was strong enough to start upon a trail.

But at last he was well and strong once more, and he began to get ready for a prairie tramp, as he called it.

The mustang which had brought him from the Indian village, he had a great affection for, and the animal had proven himself possessed of both speed and endurance, so he was to be the comrade of the scout in his trips, for Dan had given out that it was his intention to "hunt Injun."

He had a little money laid by with Hal Rice, the storekeeper, and he took it to the farm with him and there invested in a repeating rifle and the best pair of revolvers he could buy.

He also got a perfect outfit for himself, and fright and early in the morning, after a week's steady practice with his rifle and revolvers, he set out from his little cabin on the war-path.

Those who knew the scout well felt assured of two things: that he was going to try and rescue Buckskin Bill and also revenge Reuben Carter.

But he was not a man to talk much; and so they had to await his return to see what it was that caused him to go off alone on the prairie, and so carefully fix up for an extended trip.

Dan was gone for several weeks, and then one morning he was found at his cabin once more.

When questioned, he simply said:

"I jist went off on a leetle feeler."

But over his cabin door they saw that he had nailed a board, and into it had been rudely cut with a knife two words, about two feet apart.

They were as follows:

APACH'.

COMANCH'.

Beneath the word intended for Apache were two scalps.

Beneath Comanche was one.

This showed that Dan Ellis had indeed been out upon a "feeler."

He had never been in favor of scalping Indians, it was remembered, and had always advised his comrades against it.

But after his last expedition his views had doubtless changed, judging from the scalps tacked on the board above his cabin door.

The next day Dan Ellis was gone again, and several more weeks went by.

Then Mr. Middleton, who was riding by his cabin one day with his daughter, saw signs that the cabin had lately been occupied.

An examination showed that its owner had doubtless occupied it the past night, for there were fresh tracks about and a place where a pony had been staked near and cropped the grass short.

But above the door was a surer proof of Dan's return, for beneath the word Comanch' were two more scalps.

He had evidently not been idle, and the death roll was increasing.

But Dan was not to be found, so had simply returned for ammunition, it was supposed.

The news of his return soon spread through the settlement, and after that the settlers were wont often to ride out of their way to see if there had been any more additions to the scalps over the cabin door.

One morning, the second day after his mysterious visit to his home, Dan turned out of his blanket bed in a timber motte and took a view of the prairie.

It was the same motte in which he had camped with the Apaches when they had him prisoner.

He started as his eyes fell upon some objects out upon the prairie, a long way off.

"Injuns!" So he said, and a grim smile crossed his face as he prepared to add to his scalp list.

After a short observation, he added: "A Injun brave and a pappoose, they looks like, and a hoss ter let."

Nearer came the party, and then there rung out over the prairie a yell that would have drowned a trumpet in sound.

"Buckskin Bill!" The one he addressed stopped short, had his rifle ready for use, and gazed into the timber.

He had had an experience right in that motte which he had reason to remember.

But out dashed Dan Ellis, and he was at once recognized.

Buckskin Bill urged his horses forward, and soon after the hands of the scout and the border-boy were clasped in greeting.

"Billy, God bless yer! I were just makin' my way up to ther Comanche country ter see if I c'd find yer."

"But whar on 'arth did yer git thet pretty leetle gal?"

"She are as fine as silk, and God bless her, too!"

In a few words Buckskin Bill told his story, and then Dan said:

"Lord love ye, leetle gal, but yer folks is in the upper part o' ther settlement now, and they has set you down as dead."

"Lordy! but won't they be pleased ter see yer!"

"And, Billy, maybe the old folks down at ther Middleton cabin won't weep fer joy!"

"Why, bless yer mother's heart, I promised her I'd find yer, and I lighted out on ther trail."

"I picked up a few scalps, but had ter put home for food and ammunition, and went by night, fer I didn't want ter see her and say as how I hadn't found yer yit."

"But it's jist like yer not ter leave ther leetle gal thar, and to git away without no help from nobody."

"Now jist come inter ther timber, and we'll hev a breakfast as will make ther wolves weep ter look at us, and of I can't say I got yer away from ther Comanches, I kin hev ther pleasure o' goin' home with yer."

And Dan was almost beside himself with delight, while both Buckskin Bill and Frankie were equally glad.

But for the hard life she had been forced to lead among the red-skins, Frankie would have broken down under the severe strain of flight, but she bore up wonderfully, and laughingly told Dan how Buckskin Bill had told her to play sick and just what he would do to have her escape with him.

After a good breakfast and a long rest, the party mounted their horses and pressed on toward the settlement, Buckskin Bill showing Frankie, as they rode through the timber the limb which he had laid at full length upon while hiding from the red-skins.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE RETURN.

It was just before breakfast the following morning, after the meeting at the motte, when Dan Ellis was seen riding up to the very comfortable home of the Middletons, wearing his hat in a wild manner, as though to tell of some glad news.

Behind him were then seen two others, and as Buckskin Bill was recognized, the glad shout of Dan Ellis found an echo from Mr. Middleton and his eldest son, while the mother and sister of the young borderman also rushed forward to give a greeting to the escaped captives.

Frankie came in for a warm welcome also, and the praise she bestowed upon Buckskin Bill made him blush, while it pleased his mother and the others immensely.

After a short rest, Buckskin Bill and Dan, accompanied by Mr. Middleton, escorted Frankie upon her way to her new home, where her parents had settled, but with saddened hearts at the loss of their little daughter.

Mr. Willard had lost his all, at the hands of the Comanches, but the kind settlers had come to his aid, built him a cabin and Hal Rice had given him credit for what things he needed from his store, so that they were getting along passably well.

Frankie had two other sisters, older than herself by some years, and two brothers still older, and when Mr. Middleton rode on ahead and gently broke the news of her return, a scene of the wildest joy ensued, and the fond mother wept and laughed by turns at the restoration of her darling to her arms.

It was a touching scene, and Mr. Middleton motioned to Buckskin Bill to go, as soon as he could do so, and they departed, leaving the family happy in their reunion, and loud in their praise of the brave young borderman who had returned to them the child they had mourned as dead.

"Pard Bill, just what now?" asked Dan Ellis, as he stopped at the trail which led to his cabin.

"Well, Dan, I am going to remain home for awhile, and then I think I shall see what is to be done for the future," was the reply.

"I fear I shall never make a farmer of Bill, Dan, as he does not take kindly to that style of work as his brother does; but I have the means, and would like him to study a profession, if it suits him."

"Preachin' teachin', doctorin' or lawyerin'?" asked Dan.

"Doctoring, I guess would suit me best, after my experience with that old medicine chief, Death-Killer," laughed Bill.

"I would be glad to have you a doctor, my son, if you so liked," said Mr. Middleton.

"Time enough for that, Squire Middleton, arter he has chipped in a leetle with me," Dan responded.

"In what business, Dan?" "In ther killin' biz, squire," and Dan's face grew black as he spoke.

"You are revengeful, Dan," mildly said Squire Middleton.

"Squire, I were not so a year ago, and I were marfiful to ther red-skins, drawin' trigger only when I hed ter kill ter save life."

"But, when I see what I did in thet Comanch' camp, and what Buckskin Bill see too, it made me very cruel in my thoughts ag'in' ther red devils."

"Poor Renben hev gone, and I vowed ter make a dozen red-skins go under, ter kinder let him lie more easy in his grave yonder in ther mountains—oh, Lordy! he hev got no grave, fer Bill told me they let ther dogs pull him ter pieces."

"Squire, I takes ther trail ag'in in a few days, and ef Bill wants ter go with me I am willin'," and without another word Dan Ellis turned away toward his cabin.

"How changed Dan is, my son," said Squire Middleton, as he rode on homeward with Bill.

"I noticed it at once, father, in spite of his joy at seeing me home again."

"He was once so light-hearted and happy; but I do not wonder at a change in him, after all that he passed through, and I assure you it has made me ten years older, yes, and sadder and wiser, too."

"I can never efface the past five months of my life up to my dying day," and Buckskin Bill passed his hand several times across his face, as though he could wipe away from before his sight the bitter scenes which ran up before him in all their grim cruelty and horror.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE ROAD RAIDERS.

In addition to their sufferings at the hands of the Apaches and Comanches, the settlers along the valley where Squire Middleton had his home had to contend against another evil, that of late had been giving considerable trouble and bringing heavy losses upon them.

This new evil came in the shape of what were known as Road Raiders.

They were said by some to be Mexicans, come

up from the lower country for what gold they could get on the trails, and others asserted that they were Texan desperadoes.

Then it was reported that the band consisted of horse-thieves driven down from Kansas into that country.

Whatever they were, certain it is that they had stopped several trains and sacked them, while the emigrants had been deprived of their gold and what valuables they could not hide.

A stage line had been established over the trail from the nearest town in Texas to the settlement, making a trip each way weekly, and twice had this been brought to a halt and the passengers robbed.

This had occurred just before the return of Buckskin Bill, and as the matter was talked over around the home fireside, he had asked:

"But did not the passengers resist?"

"No, my son, for they were caught at a disadvantage, and the robbers were well armed, mounted, and a desperate lot."

"How many of them, father?"

"There are nine of them."

Billy said no more, but a few days after signified his intention of going to the town and buying for himself an outfit, for the Indians, it will be remembered, had captured his arms, saddle and bridle.

His father supplied him pretty liberally with money, and he mounted the box with the driver, and the coach rolled away upon its perilous trip.

"Where do the Road Raiders generally jump you, Buck?" asked Billy of the driver, who was a weatherbeaten old plainsman.

"Anywhar and everywhar, pard, fer they aint partick'ler."

"If they was, I know what to do ter give 'em a slip sometime, but they lies round loose like and, we is jist as likely ter hear hands up in an hour, as we is a hundred miles from here."

The trips between the change stations on the trail, were long ones, for it was mostly prairie country to go over, but here and there was a bit of woodland, with hill and valley, and Buckskin Bill naturally supposed that the Road Raiders would halt the coach there, if anywhere.

But right in the midst of a vast expanse of prairie he espied a horseman ahead.

"Guess he's a Raider!" said Buck.

"What, alone?"

"Ther's more 'round, pard!"

"Where are they?"

As if in answer to the question, two horsemen suddenly arose from the prairie grass, and on either side of the first one discovered.

"Can't you turn back and run for it, driver?" called out one of the passengers from within the coach and who had also been watching for Road Raiders.

"I guesses not, if yer looks abind yer," Buck replied.

There appeared two other horsemen, who had evidently been, horse and rider, lying flat in some buffalo wallow.

Then on either side appeared two men, also rising from the ground.

"Nine of them," said Buckskin Bill.

"Yes, that's them—the Nine Pins we calls 'em, and now them as has dust has ter jist hand it out; said the driver."

Buckskin Bill knew that there were three men in the coach, and one woman, and he said:

"I believe if we fought them, Buck, we could stand them off."

"I is paid ter drive this huss, pard, and not ter fight."

"What ther passengers does is not my say, but I'm thinkin' you would jist git lead while ther Road Raiders would git ther gold all the same."

The nine horsemen now began to close in around the coach, and Buck came to a halt.

As they approached, it was seen that they were all armed with rifles, and held them ready for use.

They were also well mounted, and their heads were covered with a small bag, in which holes were cut for the eyes, and these were so small that it could not be seen whether the men were white, black or red, for their hands were gloved.

They were a startling looking lot, and it was no wonder that resistance had seldom been offered to their demands for money.

Buckskin Bill eyed them closely, taking a close survey of first one and then the other, as they drew near, and their horses also came in for a share of scrutiny.

"Well, driver, how many pilgrims aboard?" asked the leader, a man somewhat taller than the others, and this seemed about the only differ-

ence between him and his men, as far as outward observation went.

"Five, four men and one woman," replied Buck.

"That young gentleman on the box is one."

"Yes, I am a passenger," quietly said Buckskin Bill.

"Well, out with your money, all of you, for I don't wish to be detained," said the leader of the Road Raiders.

Billy threw his pocket-book to the leader, and it was skillfully caught by him, while two of his men advanced to the stage doors, one on either side.

"This is not all you have, sir," sternly said the leader to Billy, as he drew out of the pocket book only about twenty dollars.

"It's all the money I have."

"You lie, for I know that you have more."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"You are Billy Middleton."

"Sure."

"You are going to the town to buy a rifle, revolvers, and complete outfit, and your father gave you several hundred dollars."

Billy laughed, and it seemed to anger the Road Raider chief, who said sternly:

"I'll stand no nonsense, Buckskin Bill, but will have your money or your life."

"Pard, I have given you every dollar I have: but I hold an order from Hal Rice to his agent in town to let me have what money I need."

"Now that is all I can do for you."

The Road Raider chief uttered an oath and as the woman had handed over a snug little sum, and the three male passengers a few hundred more, he seemed satisfied and waving to his men to follow him, he dashed away across the prairie.

CHAPTER XXV. SUSPICIONS.

THERE was one thing that seemed strange to Stage-Driver Buck Robbins, and that was that, whenever he carried any passengers who were supposed to be "well fixed," as he expressed it, the Road Raiders were sure to halt him.

In his stage-driving on that trail he had been halted seven times out of some sixty trips, and each time he had had passengers who had considerable money with them.

A strange thing about it, too, was that the Road Raiders never halted the coach on its home run, but upon the trip to the town, when the passengers were supposed to have money with them.

This fact Buckskin Bill had noticed, in conversing with Buck upon the subject, and when he returned home from his trip to town, armed with his new weapons and outfit, he had placed his handsome saddle and bridle upon his mustang and ridden over to see Dan Ellis.

He found Dan just about to start upon a scalp-hunting expedition, and said:

"I'm glad I caught you, Dan, for I wish to have a talk with you."

"Well, Bill, what's up?"

"I've been to the town."

"So I heard yer hed gone; but let me look at yer rifle and weepins."

"Them's daisies to kill, and no mistake," he said admiringly, and from the rifle to the bridle he was charmed with Buckskin Bill's purchases.

"Now, Pard Bill, hev yer leetle say," said Dan, after he had admired the outfit.

"We were stopped by the Road Raiders on the trail over, Dan."

"Didn't get yer money though?"

"Yes, they got some, but I had an order for the rest, so they could not use it."

"You was in luck, but what is they like?"

"All well armed and mounted, but their faces are hidden under bags they wear over their heads."

"They is a cunning lot, I've heerd."

"I took them all in, horses too, as well as I could, Dan."

"I'll bet yer."

"And Dan, they seem to know just when there are folks aboard with dust."

"That's queer."

"And he knew me, and that I was supposed to have dust."

"What do you think of it, Billy?"

"I think that somebody in the settlement is a spy for them."

"Lordy."

"Don't it look so?"

"It do."

"Well, I am sure it is so."

"Does yer consider who it is, Pard Bill?"

"I asked my father if he told any one that he intended to give me some money, and he said

that he asked Hal Rice, as I requested him to do, to give me an order on the bank instead of the cash."

"Well?"

"He did not speak to any one else about it, except my mother."

"Then how did it git out?"

"I went to see Hal Rice, before I came here, and asked him about it, and he said that the new school-teacher was in the store, when father asked him for the order, and he was seated at the desk making up his books, which he pays him to do."

"It couldn't be the teacher let it out, Billy."

"I don't wish you to start on the trail yet, but to do something for me?"

"I'll do it, Bill."

"Keep your eyes on that school-teacher for a few days, and let me know just what he does."

"I'll stick close to him, Bill."

"Don't let him suspect your scheme?"

"Trust me for that."

After some further conversation Buckskin Bill left the cabin of the scout and half an hour after dismounted at the settlement store of Hal Rice.

Hal Rice was a man of considerable means.

He had been a miner in New Mexico, and saving his money, had decided to increase it by keeping a store in a border settlement.

The spot he had chosen was a good one, for there were several hundred families within a radius of thirty miles, and the prices he got for his goods gave him a very large profit, so that he could afford to meet with losses from the Indians now and then.

He had built a large log-cabin, surrounding it with a high stockade wall, so that his store was called "The Fort" by the settlers.

He kept two-score of weapons—rifles and revolvers—ready loaded in a sack, so as to be got at easily in case of an Indian raid, and there were two men to look after his mule teams and wagons, so that he was able to call upon them for help in case of need.

Once the Comanches had paid his store a visit, but the resistance they had met with had been such that they retreated empty-handed.

In his store Hal Rice kept a large stock constantly on hand, and, as the reader has seen, when he wished to replenish he was wont to hire teamsters and a guard to send along with his wagons to the town.

Since the stage-coach had begun to run, all small articles came by it for the store, and the wagon-train had to make less frequent trips.

The burning of his wagons and running off of his mules had not distressed the good-hearted storekeeper as much as had the loss of Pilot Pete and the others who had been killed.

"Money will buy more mules and wagons and goods, but dust won't buy life," he had said to Squire Middleton.

Buckskin Bill he greatly admired, and was wont to say that he wished he had married and was the father of just such a youth.

When Buckskin Bill rode up to his door, he called out:

"What! back again, Billy?"

"Yes, Mr. Rice, I want to get a few things for home which I forgot."

"Come in, my boy."

And the storekeeper arose from his rustic chair, in which he had been seated out upon the little piazza, and went into the commodious cabin.

Bill made a few purchases, and then said:

"Mr. Rice, I think I shall have to make another trip to town."

"When, Billy?"

"Next week, when Buck goes."

"Don't your new weapons suit you?"

"Oh, yes; but then there are several of the settlers who wish to send considerable money to town to bank, and wish me to take it for them."

"I see; but you had better take your horse for it, Billy, as the Road Raiders might strike the coach, you know."

"They won't know about my having money, and I can hide it away under the seat in a leather bag that will look like a coach cushion."

"You're cunning, Billy; but don't speak of it to any one."

"No, I'll keep dark about it, you may be sure, for I guess there'll be over two thousand dollars in the lot, all gold, and perhaps twice as much; but I must be off," and taking his purchases, Buckskin Bill mounted his horse and started homeward.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE HIDDEN TREASURE.

A WEEK after the visit of Buckskin Bill to the cabin of Dan Ellis, and the store of Hal Rice,

the stage that left on its regular weekly trip for the town, carried but one passenger.

That one was Buckskin Bill, and he rode inside, instead of upon the box with Buck, the driver.

Why he did so, Buck did not understand, and also regretted, for he was fond of talking and had found the youth a remarkably good listener.

The coach had not been halted by the Road-Raiders since the time upon which Buckskin Bill had gone, and Buck had said:

"I hopes you'll git through all right this time, Pard Billy."

When on the prairie, not far from a stream heavily fringed with timber, a sudden call from Buck caused Buckskin Bill to glance quickly out of the window.

"It's the Raiders, Billy."

"I see them, Buck," was the cool reply.

Out from the timber had dashed the "Nine Pins" as the driver had called them, stretched out in a long line, and riding so as to encircle the stage.

Buck had at once come to a halt, while he said:

"If yer hasn't any dust, Billy, they'll be mad as a Comanche."

Bill made no reply, but calmly watched the approach of the robbers.

They were mounted, he saw, upon the same horses as before, with perhaps the exception of the chief, and they came on at a swinging gallop, their rifles ready for use.

In a few moments they had surrounded the coach, and the leader called out:

"Ho, Driver Buck, how many pilgrims?"

"Only one, and yer'll git poor pickin' this time, or I are a liar."

"I beg leave to differ with you, Pard Buck," and the chief rode up to the door of the coach, himself, holding a revolver in his hand.

"Ah! it is you, my fine fellow?" he said.

"Yes, we meet again, and some day we will meet once too often for your good," quietly said Bill.

"You think so, eh?"

"Yes."

"No threats, or you may find me as cruel a foe as the Comanches."

"I do not doubt it."

"Come, out with your money, Bill Middleton, for I am in a hurry."

"How is it that you know me?"

"Never mind, but you see that I do, so out with your money."

"I have but precious little with me."

"I know better."

"Here are four dollars, all the money I have."

"It is not so."

"I tell you the truth."

"You lie, and you know it."

"I do not."

"You have gold with you."

"Then search me."

"I prefer to search that cushion."

"Hand it out!"

Buckskin Bill laughed and said:

"The cushion?"

"Yes."

He handed out one of the cushions of the coach.

"It is too light; give me the one you are sitting on."

"Ain't they all alike?"

"No!"

Buckskin Bill's face now wore a worried look, and seeing it the Road Raider said:

"Come, hand over that cushion if you value your life."

"Say, don't take this, for I admit there is something in it, but it was intrusted to me."

"Give it to me, I say!"

Buckskin Bill still hesitated, and the Road Raider thrust his revolver into his face.

"Take it then!" he said fiercely, as he moved his seat.

The man grasped the cushion, which in appearance was like the others in the coach, only he found it very heavy.

He however drew it up before him on the saddle, and with a bow of mock politeness said:

"This time it is not paper money, Buckskin Bill."

"Good-by."

He wheeled his horse quickly and rode away followed by his men.

"Lordy, pard! I didn't know yer little game."

"I declar' this are awful, fer thet cushion were well loaded," Buck said, in a sympathetic tone.

"Yes, it was a heavy prize, Buck," replied Bill.

Then the stage rolled on once more; but it

hadn't gone very far before Bill saw that the Road Raiders had gotten out of sight.

Then he called out:

"Hold on, Buck!"

"Well, pard?"

"I will start back on foot."

"Don't do it, Billy."

"Yes, I will return to the settlement."

"Don't be a fool, pard."

"I will not go on, and I can get back by a little after nightfall."

"I wish you wouldn't do it, Billy, for thar's wolves on the way."

"I don't mind wolves any more than I do buffaloes, Buck."

"Then thar's Injuns."

"I guess not any down so far as this, Buck."

"The Road Raiders might turn back on you."

"They have gone to their retreat to count their treasure."

"Waal, yer will go?"

"Yes."

"I hates ter see yer; but if yer must, good-by, Pard Billy."

The young borderer dismounted from the stage, and with a wave of his hand to Buck, started upon the back trail to the settlement.

A walk of several miles brought him to a clump of timber, and as he entered it he saw a man advancing toward him.

It was Dan Ellis and he was leading his own and Buckskin Bill's horses, and it looked as though the meeting between the two was not an accidental one.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BUCKSKIN BILL'S PLOT.

"WAAL, Pard Billy, yer seen 'em?"

Such was the salutation of Dan Ellis, when he met Buckskin Bill in the mottle.

"Yes, they robbed me."

"Got the treasure?"

"They did."

"And hev gone?"

"Yes, they lost no time in getting off to their stronghold to count it."

"Too bad."

"It will be."

"Now which way?"

"Back to the settlement, Dan, and we'll lose no time."

Mounting their horses they rode away at a canter, and it was just about sunset when they drew up at the store of Hal Rice.

"What, back again, Billy?" cried Hal Rice, who was surprised, as he had seen the youth depart in the coach early that morning.

"Yes, the Road Raiders robbed me, and so I came back."

"What! did they get your gold?"

"As nicely as I supposed it was hidden, they got the cushion," and Bill entered the store with Hal Rice, followed by Dan Ellis.

"Do you mean to say that you were robbed, Pard Billy?" asked a young man, rising from a desk where he was at work on the storekeepers books.

It was Braxton Canfield, the school teacher, who had been engaged to take the place of Parson Green, as the dominie found he had all the work he could do to preach, and visit his numerous flock, so had gladly yielded up to another the duty of teaching the children of the settlement.

"Yes, Mr. Canfield, I was robbed," replied Buckskin Bill.

"So I heard you say to Mr. Rice," responded the teacher, who aided the storekeeper after school hours, by keeping his books for him.

"It is too bad," said Braxton Canfield with real sympathy in his voice.

"But did they threaten your life?"

"Yes, the chief of the Road Raiders advanced to the coach door and, thrusting his revolver in my face demanded my money, or my life, just like this."

As he spoke Buckskin Bill thrust his own revolver in the face of the teacher, and continued in a low, earnest tone:

"Teacher Canfield, hands up or I will kill you!"

The man started back, and Hal Rice uttered a cry of amazement, but Buckskin Bill repeated:

"Hands up, or I fire!"

Up went the man's hands, while he hissed forth:

"What does this mean, Buckskin Bill?"

"Yes, what does it mean?" cried Hal Rice.

Without replying at once, Billy said:

"Dan, take his spurs, for he's fixed."

Dan quickly stepped forward and took revolvers from under the loose coat worn by the teacher.

"Now the rope, please, Dan."

The scout took a small rope from his pocket

and quickly bound the teacher, while Hal Rice again asked:

"Billy, what in the name of thunder do you mean?"

"Mr. Rice, I mean that this man is the spy of the Road Raiders, for we have convicted him of so being."

"It is a lie!" shouted Braxton Canfield.

"It cannot be, Bill," Hal Rice added.

"It is, but let us close the store, and I'll tell you all," and impressed by the manner of the youth, Hal Rice closed his store, and lighting a lamp, said:

"Now, out with it, Billy."

The teacher was as white as a corpse, and stood glaring at his young accuser like a tiger at bay.

"I was surprised when I was told by the Road Raider chief that he knew I had money, on my other trip to town, and I asked who had known it besides my father and yourself."

"You told me that the teacher was here at the time."

"Then I got Dan to watch the teacher, and I did the same, and you remember that I told you I was going to town to take some money?"

"Yes."

"I said I would put it in a cushion like those in the coach?"

"Yes."

"Well, when I told you that, this man sat behind the desk, working on your books."

"I saw him there and said it for his benefit."

"Yes, I remember he was there, Billy."

"Well, that night he left his cabin and met a horseman three miles from here, and then returned home."

"I came and told you when I was to take the stage, and he heard me, and while I went out to the stable, and was working on a leather cushion there, putting something into the moss filling and sewing it up, this man came out and saw me."

"He followed me to see what I was doing."

"That night he again went out to the mottle and met a horseman, but he little dreamed that Dan Ellis was upon his trail."

"Curse you!" came from the lips of the teacher.

"What I put in the cushion was not gold, as he supposed, but nails and lead, and that is what the Road Raiders got, and are mad enough by this time at being fooled."

"Oh Billy!" said Hal Rice.

"The neighbors sent their money on the other trip of the coach, so that went through all right, and my old cushion was opened."

"Now do you believe that this man is guilty, Mr. Rice?"

"It looks so."

"It is a base lie, that these two have concocted against me."

"Well, Braxton Canfield, I am going to give you a chance for your life, before I tell the settlers."

"What do you mean?" and the man turned livid.

"I mean that you must lead a party of us to the retreat of the Road Raiders."

"If you do, well and good for yourself, for you shall go free unharmed."

"But if you do not, I will call the settlers together, and you will be lynched as sure as you are a spy and a thief."

"Now, which will you do?"

The man made no reply.

"Quick! will you betray your comrades in crime, or will you die?"

"You know we will stand no nonsense, Canfield," said Hal Rice.

"Not a bit, pard," added Dan Ellis.

"My life is dearer to me than the lives of others, so I'll squeal."

"But do I get a pledge from you all that I can go free unharmed?" bluntly said the man.

"Yes."

"I say so."

"You kin go free, only don't linger around these parts," added Dan Ellis, after the others had answered.

"I accept your terms."

"Well, we will at once get the settlers living nearest here together and start to-night, for we can pick up a dozen men besides ourselves, on the way," said Buckskin Bill.

So it was decided, and fifteen minutes after, the party had set out from the store, the treacherous traitor tied to his horse, and turned over to Dan Ellis for safe-keeping, while Buckskin Bill and Hal Rice rode on ahead to gather up the settlers living nearest the trail they were to take.

Before midnight sixteen men had assembled at a given rendezvous, and by common consent Buckskin Bill was made captain, as it was

through his plotting that the Road Raiders were to be run to earth.

Then, with Braxton Canfield, pale and silent, riding between Buckskin Bill and Dan Ellis, the party set out upon the raid upon the Raiders, all well armed and mounted.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

THE raid upon the Road Raiders proved to be a perfect success, for, true to his desire to save his own life, Braxton Canfield had led the band of settlers directly upon the secret camp of the outlaws.

It happened to be the home of a settler, whom no one had suspected of being an outlaw, but who had been a year only a dweller on that part of the border.

He had several cattle-men with him, as he called them; but they were members of his outlaw band, while others were constantly kept hiding in the chapparal, spying out, as they could, work for their lawless bands to accomplish.

Braxton Canfield's brother was the captain of the Road Raiders, while he, with a good education, had sought occupation in the settlement as school-teacher, while he could at the same time serve as spy for his lawless comrades.

But for the cunning of Buckskin Bill, he might long have kept up his wicked work, and more, would have made a beautiful girl, the daughter of a settler, his wife.

The Road Raiders had been surprised in their cabin, the door being opened at the call of Braxton Canfield, and though they resisted, when they saw they were in a trap, they were quickly subdued, after two of them had been shot.

Braxton Canfield had been at once allowed to depart, but ere he got out of hearing, he heard his brother's curse upon him, as he swung into the air at the end of a rope.

After this exploit, the mother of Buckskin Bill became so nervous at the wild life he was leading, that, from her entreaties, he consented to go away to school, and soon after departed for St. Louis.

After two years spent there, he began the study of medicine, which his experience under Death-Killer had given him a fancy for.

After attending a course of medical lectures, Buckskin Bill went to the Indian Territory to visit his family, and once among the old scenes, the old love of adventure came back upon him with full force, and in his heart a bitter feeling of revenge revived when he was told that his old pard, Dan Ellis, after having nailed above his door over a dozen scalps, had been captured by Fire Eyes and his warriors and cruelly put to death.

One morning the family awoke, to find Buckskin Bill gone on the war-path, for so said a note he had left for his father.

Mounted upon a splendid horse, and with the most improved weapons, Buckskin Bill took the trail to avenge Dan Ellis, and before long it became known that Comanche scalplocks were being tacked upon the door of the dead scout's deserted cabin.

So persistently did Buckskin Bill hunt down his red foes, that before very long he became known as the Comanches' Shadow.

One day, severely wounded, he rode up to the home of a well-to-do settler, and too weak to help himself, he was borne into the house and tenderly cared for.

For weeks there was one who watched over him by night and day, and happy indeed she was when he was out of all danger.

That kind nurse was Frankie Willard, grown into a beautiful girl of sixteen, and, at her entreaty Buckskin Bill gave up his wild life and once more went back to his studies.

When he next returned to the Indian Territory, it was to claim Frankie Willard as his wife, for she was there, teaching school in the same little log school-house where the scholars under Buckskin Bill had beaten off the Comanches, and where afterward the Teacher-Spy, Braxton Canfield, had taught "young ideas how to shoot."

The settlement had in the mean time become much more thickly populated, and yet all knew well the name of Buckskin Bill, the Shadow of the Comanches, and when he was married to pretty Frankie Willard, many a warm handshake he received, with congratulations and good wishes for a long and happy life.

And little do those dream now, who meet the gallant borderman among the marts of busy life, of the many perils he has passed through in following red-skins over crimson trails.

THE END.

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- 260 Dare-Devil Dan, the Young Prairie Ranger.
- 272 Minkskin Mike, the Boy Sharpshooter.
- 290 Little Foxfire, the Boy Spy; or, Old Caleb Arbuttle.
- 300 The Sky Demon; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.
- 384 Whip-King Joe, the Boy Ranchero.
- 409 Hercules; or, Dick, the Boy Ranger.
- 417 Webfoot Moose, the Tramp Detective.
- 457 Wingedfoot Fred; or, Old Polar Saul.
- 468 Tamarac Tom, the Big Trapper Boy.
- 482 Stonewall Bob, the Boy Trojan.
- 562 Blundering Bull, the Hermit Boy Trapper.
- 652 Don Barr, the Plains Freelance.
- 670 Norway Nels, the Big Boy Mountaineer.
- 778 Highland Harry, the Wizard Rifleman.

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- 28 Nick o' the Night; or, The Boy Spy of '76.
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- 82 Kit Harefoot, the Wood-Hawk; or, Old Powder-face.
- 94 Midnight Jack; or, The Boy Trapper.
- 106 Old Frosty, the Guide; or, The White Queen.
- 128 Klawa Charley, the White Mustang.
- 139 Judge Lynch Jr.; or, The Boy Vigilante.
- 155 Gold Trigger, the Sport; or, The Girl Avenger.
- 169 Tornado Tom; or, Injun Jack From Red Core.
- 188 Ned Temple, the Border Boy; or, The Mad Hunter.
- 198 Arkansas; or, The Queen of Fate's Revenge.
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- 231 Plucky Phil; or, Rosa, the Red Jezebel.
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- 255 Captain Apollo, the King-Pin of Bowie.
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- 279 Old Winch; or, The Buckskin Desperado.
- 294 Dynamite Dan; or, The Bowtie Blade of Gochetopa.
- 302 The Mountain Detective; or, The Trigger Boy Bully.
- 316 Old Eclipse, Tramp Card of Arizona.
- 326 The Ten Pardos; or, The Terror of Take-Notice.
- 336 Big Benson; or, The Queen of the Lasso.
- 345 Piltless Matt; or, Red Thunderbolt's Secret.
- 354 Cool Sam and Pard; or, The Terrible Six.
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- 386 Captain Outlaw; or, The Buccaneer's Girl Fox.
- 396 Rough Rob; or, The Twin Champions of Blue Blazes.
- 411 The Silken Lasso; or, The Rose of Ranch Robin.
- 418 Felix Fox, the Boy Spotter; or, The Gold Gang of New York.
- 425 Texas Tramp, the Border Rattler.
- 436 Phil Flash, the New York Fox; or, The Mystery of Room 21.
- 445 The City Vampire; or, Red Rollo's Pigeon.
- 461 One Against Fifty; or, The Last Man of Keno Bar.
- 470 The Boy Shadow; or, Felix Fox's Hunt.
- 477 The Excelsior Sport; or, The Washington Spotter.
- 499 Single Sight, the One-Eyed Sport.
- 502 Branded Ben, the Night Ferret.
- 512 Dodger Dick, the Wharf-Spy Detective.
- 521 Dodger Dick's Best Dodge; or, The Gotham Gold Gang.
- 528 Fox and Falcon, the Bowery Shadows.
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- 548 Dodger Dick's Double; or, The Rival Boy Detectives.
- 558 Dodger Dick's Desperate Case.
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- 582 Dodger Dick's Drop; or, The Man from Jersey.
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- 780 Tonkaway Tom, the Red Wizard.

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- 275 Arizona Jack; or, Giant George's Pard.
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- 327 Creeping Cat, the Caddo; or, The Red and White Pard.
- 332 Frio Fred; or, The Tonkaway's Trust.
- 344 The Fighting Trio; or, Rattlesnake, the Tonkaway.
- 349 Wild Wolf; or, Big-Foot Wallace to the Front.
- 357 The Ranch Raiders; or, The Siege of Fort Purgatory.
- 364 Snap-Shot, the Boy Ranger.
- 375 Chloa, the Creek; or, The Three Thunderbolts.
- 381 Bandera Bill; or, Frio Frank to the Front.
- 392 Romeo and the Red; or, The Belonged Ranch.
- 404 Little Lariat; or, Pecan Pete's Big Rampage.
- 414 The Daisy from Denver.
- 427 The Three Trailers; or, Old Rocky on the Rampage.
- 442 Bluff Bill; or, The Lenz of the Leona.
- 455 Little Bone Star; or, The Belle of the Cibola.
- 634 Cache Carl, the Chico Giant.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

- 11 The Two Detectives; or, The Fortunes of a Bowery Girl.
- 76 Abe Colt, the Crow-Killer.
- 79 Sol Ginger, the Giant Trapper.
- 238 Joe Buck of Angels and His Boy Pard.
- 447 New York Nat. A Tale of Tricks and Traps in Gotham.
- 458 New England Nick; or, The Fortunes of a Foul-ling.
- 464 Nimble Nick, the Circus Prince.
- 493 Taos Ted, the Arizona Sport.
- 510 Cool Colorado, the Half-Breed Detective.
- 518 Cool Colorado in New York; or, The Cowboy's Fight.

BY GEORGE C. JENKS.

- 485 Git Thar Ownce, the Unknown.
- 492 Git Thar Ownce's Pledge.
- 513 The Demon Doctor; or, Deadhold, the Kid Detective.
- 581 Double-Curve Dan, the Pitcher Detective.
- 598 Flute, the Singer Detective; or, Ownce in a New Role.
- 608 The Pitcher Detective's Foll; or, Dan's Double Play.
- 616 The Ocean Detective; or, The Last Cruise of the Black Bear.
- 681 The Pitcher Detective's Toughest Tussle.
- 736 Larry the Thoroughbred; or, Beaten on Every Side.
- 779 Iron Hand, the Charmed Detective.

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- 118 Will Somers, the Boy Detective.
- 122 Phil Hardy, the Boss Boy.
- 126 Pincayune Pete; or, Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.
- 130 Detective Dick; or, The Hero in Rags.
- 142 Handsome Harry, the Bootblack Detective.
- 147 Will Wildfire, the Thoroughbred.
- 152 Black Boss, Will Wildfire's Racer.
- 157 Mike Merry, the Harbor Police Boy.
- 162 Will Wildfire in the Woods.
- 165 Billy Baggage, the Railroad Boy.
- 170 A Trump Card; or, Will Wildfire Wins and Loses.
- 174 Bob Rockett; or, Mysteries of New York.
- 179 Bob Rockett, the Bank Runner.
- 188 The Hidden Hand; or, Will Wildfire's Revenge.
- 187 Fred Halyard, the Life Boat Boy; or, The Smugglers.
- 189 Bob Rockett; or, Driven to the Wall.
- 196 Shadowed; or, Bob Rockett's Fight for Life.
- 206 Dark Paul, the Tiger King.
- 212 Dashing Dave, the Dandy Detective.
- 220 Tom Tanner; or, The Black Sheep of the Flock.
- 225 Sam Charcoal, the Premium Dandy.
- 235 Shadow Sam, the Messenger Boy.
- 242 The Two "Bloods"; or, Shenandoah Bill and His Gang.
- 252 Dick Dashaway; or, A Dakota Boy in Chicago.
- 262 The Young Sharps; or, Rollicking Mike's Hot Trail.
- 274 Jolly Jim, the Detective Apprentice.
- 289 Jolly Jim's Job; or, The Young Detective.
- 298 The Water-Hound; or, The Young Thoroughbred.
- 305 Dashaway, of Dakota; or, A Western Lad in Quaker City.
- 324 Ralph Ready, the Hotel Boy Detective.
- 341 Tony Thorne, the Vagabond Detective.
- 353 The Reporter-Detective; or, Fred Flyer's Blizzard.
- 367 Wide-Awake Joe; or, A Boy of the Times.
- 379 Larry, the Leveler; or, The Bloods of the Boulevard.
- 403 Firefly Jack, the River-Rat Detective.
- 423 The Lost Finger; or, The Entrapped Cashier.
- 428 Fred Flyer, the Reporter Detective.
- 432 Invincible Logan, the Pinkerton Ferret.
- 456 Billy Brick, the Jolly Vagabond.
- 466 Wide-Awake Jerry, Detective; or, Entombed Alive.
- 479 Detective Dodge; or, The Mystery of Frank Hearty.
- 488 Will Dick Rackett; or, How He Fought for Honor.
- 501 Boots, the Boy Fireman; or, Too Sharp for the Sharper.
- 566 The Secret Service Boy Detective.
- 596 Jimmy the Kid; or, A Lamb Among Wolves.
- 627 Tom Bruce of Arkansas; or, The Wolf in the Fold.
- 655 Plucky Paul, the Boy Speculator.
- 667 Rob and Sam, the Daisy Detectives.
- 709 The Curbstone Detective; or, Harry Hale's Big Beat.
- 757 Detective Frank's Sweep-stakes.

BY J. W. OSBON.

- 469 The Rival Giants of Nowhar.
- 498 Cactus Burr, the Man from Hard Luck.
- 537 Old Buckeye, the Sierra Shadow.
- 564 Powder Phil, the Boy Miner; or, The Man Without a Past.
- 609 Holly Dorrit, the Veteran Detective.
- 620 Little Lightning's League; or, The Mystery of the Island.
- 638 Plucky Paul, the Boy Prospector.
- 751 Gold-Dust Dan, the Trail Patrol.
- 755 Gold-Dust Dan's Oath; or, Reckless Roy, the Regulator.

BY JO PIERCE.

- 397 Rob o' the Bowery; or, The Prince of Mulberry Street.
- 415 The Vagabond Detective; or, Bowery Bob's Boom.
- 452 Hotspur Bob, the Street-Boat Detective.
- 460 The Lawyer's Shadow; or, Luke's Legacy.
- 472 Jaunty Joe, the Young Horse-King.
- 494 Surly Sim, the Young Ferryman Detective.
- 504 Five Points Phil, the Pavement Prince.
- 509 Jack Jagger, the Butcher Boy Detective.
- 516 Tartar Tim; or, Five Points Phil's Menagerie.
- 526 North River Nat, the Pier Detective.
- 533 Wrestling Rex, the Pride of the Sixth Ward.
- 541 Jeff Flicker, the Stable Boy Detective.
- 551 Nick Nettle, the Boy Shadow; or, The Old Well Mystery.
- 559 Harlem Jack, the Office Boy Detective.
- 569 Brooklyn Ben, the On-His-Own-Hook Detective.
- 577 Pavement Pete, the Secret Sifter.
- 588 Jack-o'-Lantern, the Under-Sea Prospector.
- 608 Wide-Awake Bert, the Street-Stercor.
- 614 Whistling Jacob, the Detective's Aid.
- 628 Buck Bumblebee, the Harlem Hummer.
- 639 Sunrise Saul, the Express-Train Ferret.
- 649 Gamlin Bob, the Bowery Badger; or, Scooping a Slippery Set.
- 658 Sky-Rocket Rob, the Life-Saver.
- 683 Saltpeper Sol, the New York Navigator.
- 694 Spley Jim, the Only One of His Kind.
- 706 Tom Thistle, the Road-House Detective.
- 717 Mosquito Jack, the Hustler Gamlin.
- 726 Dennis Duff, the Brown Sport's Kid.
- 744 Dick of the Dock, the Night Watch.
- 765 Flipper Flynn, the Street Patrol.
- 771 Foxy Fred's Odd Pard; or, The Keener's Huge Hustle.
- 781 Cast-Off Cale, the Scapgoat Detective.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE.

- 67 Patent-Leather Joe; or, Old Rattlesnake, the Charmer.
- 175 Captain Arizona; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Big Game.
- 198 Captain Mark; or, Patent-Leather Joe's Defeat.
- 219 Despard, the Duellist; or, The Mountain Vampire.
- 338 A Tough Boy; or, The Dwarf's Revenge.
- 368 Little Tornado; or, The Outcasts of the Glen.
- 378 Little Jingo; or, The Queer Pard.
- 388 Little Oh-my; or, Caught in His Own Trap.
- 401 Little Shoo-Fly; or, A Race for a Ranch.
- 408 Little Leather-Breeches; or, Old Jumbo's Curse.
- 431 Little Ah Sint; or, The Curse of Blood.
- 451 Colorado Kate. A Tale of the Alms.
- 480 Three Jolly Pardos; or, The Pets of Paddy's Flat.
- 517 Jim Gladden's Deputy; or, The Jolly Pard's Campaign.
- 527 The Jolly Pardos to the Rescue; or, The Jack of Hearts.
- 547 Sandy Andy; or, A Good Man Down.
- 556 Lariat Lili; or, The Cast for a Life.
- 574 Old Weasel-top, the Man with the Dogs.
- 593 Keen Clem, the Ranch Tramp.
- 599 Jim Dandy, the No-Name Sport.
- 613 Billy Blazes; or, The Skeleton's Legacy.
- 635 Oklahoma Hi, the Blue-Coat Scout.
- 648 Happy Harry's Big Find; or, The Beautiful Jezebel.
- 664 Cheeky Charley, the Special.

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- 2 Yellowstone Jack; or, The Trapper.
- 48 Black John, the Road-Agent; or, The Outlaw's Retreat.
- 65 Hurricane Bill; or, Mustang Sam and His Pard.
- 119 Mustang Sam; or, The King of the Plains.
- 136 Night-Hawk Kit; or, The Daughter of the Ranch.
- 144 Dainty Lance, the Boy Sport.
- 151 Panther Paul; or, Dainty Lance to the Rescue.
- 160 The Black Giant; or, Dainty Lance in Jeopardy.
- 168 Deadly Dash; or, Fighting Fire with Fire.
- 184 The Boy Trailers; or, Dainty Lance on the War-Path.
- 203 The Boy Pardos; or, Dainty Lance Unmasks.
- 211 Crooked Cale, the Caliban of Celestial City.
- 310 The Barranca Wolf; or, The Beautiful Decoy.
- 319 The Black Rider; or, The Horse-Thieves' League.
- 335 Old Double Fist; or, The Strange Guide.
- 355 The King of the Woods; or, Daniel Boone's Last Trail.
- 449 Kit Fox, the Border Boy Detective.
- 625 Chinapin Dan, the Boy Trapper.
- 677 Chinapin Dan's Second Trail.
- 688 Chinapin Dan's Home Stretch.
- 698 Old Crazy, the Man Without a Head.
- 708 Light-Heart Lute's Legacy.
- 718 Light-Heart Lute's Last Trail.
- 723 Silverblade, the Shoshone.
- 729 Silverblade, the Half-Blood; or, The Border Beagle at Bay.
- 739 Silverblade, the Hostile; or, The Border Beagle's Trail.
- 748 Silverblade, the Friendly; or, The Border Beagle's Boy Pard.

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- 167 Asa Scott, the Steamboat Boy; or, The Mississippi Pirates.
- 199 Featherweight, the Boy Champion of the Quaking.
- 228 Ozark Alf; or, Featherweight Among the Outlaws.
- 232 The Typo Detective; or, Weasel, the Boy Tramp.
- 295 Fearless Phil; or, The King of Quartzville.
- 311 The Roving Sport; or, The Pride of Chuckaluck Camp.
- 322 Nemo, the Detective; or, Kit Kenyon's Vendetta.
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- 315 Ned, the Cabin Boy; or, The Witch of the Fort.
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- 176 The Boy Runaway; or, The Buccaneer of the Bay.
- 180 The Sea Trapper; or, A Vow Well Kept.
- 192 Captain Kilt; or, The Mystery of Montauk Point.

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- 78 Blue Dick; or, The Yellow Chief's Vengeance.
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- 137 The Helpless Hand; or, Backwoods Retribution.
- 239 The Gold-seeker Guide; or, The Lost Mountain.

BY CAPT. ALFRED B. TAYLOR, U. S. A.

- 191 Buffalo Billy, the Boy Bullwhacker.
- 194 Buffalo Bill's Bet; or, The Gambler Guide.

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- 256 Young Kentucky; or, The Red Lasso.
- 270 Blizzard Ben; or, The Riot at Keno Camp.
- 286 Josh, the Boy Tenderfoot.

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- 292 Sancho Pedro, the Boy Bandit.
- 301 Leadville Nick, the Boy Sport.
- 312 Redtop Rube, the Vigilante Prince.
- 333 Brimstone Bob, and His Lightning Horse Quartette.
- 352 Tombstone Tom, the Arizona Boy of "Sand."
- 359 Durango Dave, the Young Champion Wrestler.
- 371 Kingbolt Chris, the Young Hard-Shell Detective.
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- 390 Jaguar Joe, of the Mountain Mail-Line.

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- 254 The Half-Blood; or, The Panther of the Plains.
- 271 The Huge Hunter; or, The Steam Prairie Man.

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- 42 Deadwood Dick's Bonanza; or, The Phantom Miner.
- 49 Deadwood Dick in Danger; or, Omana Oil.
- 57 Deadwood Dick's Engage; or, The Parade of Flood Bar.
- 73 Deadwood Dick on Deck; or, Calamity & one, the Heroine.
- 77 Deadwood Dick's Last Act; or, Corduroy Charlie.
- 100 Deadwood Dick in Leadville.
- 104 Deadwood Dick's Device; or, The Double Cross Sign.
- 109 Deadwood Dick as Detective.
- 129 Deadwood Dick's Double; or, The Gorgon's Gulch Ghost.
- 138 Deadwood Dick's Home Base; or, Blonde Bill.
- 149 Deadwood Dick's Big Strike; or, A Game of Gold.
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- 195 Deadwood Dick's Dream; or, The Rivals of the Road.
- 201 Deadwood Dick's Ward; or, The Black Hill's Jezebel.
- 205 Deadwood Dick's Doom; or, Calamity Jane's Adventure.
- 217 Deadwood Dick's Dead Deal.
- 221 Deadwood Dick's Death-Plant.
- 232 Gold-Dust Dick, A Romance of Roughs and Toughs.
- 263 Deadwood Dick's Divide; or, The Spirit of Swamp Lake.
- 268 Deadwood Dick's Death Trail.
- 309 Deadwood Dick's Deal; or, The Gold Brick of Oregon.
- 321 Deadwood Dick's Dozen; or, The Fakir of Phantom Flats.
- 347 Deadwood Dick's Ducats; or, Days in the Diggings.
- 351 Deadwood Dick Sentenced; or, The Terrible Vendetta.
- 362 Deadwood Dick's Claim.
- 405 Deadwood Dick in Dead City.
- 410 Deadwood Dick's Diamonds.
- 421 Deadwood Dick in New York; or, A "Cute Case."
- 450 Deadwood Dick's Dust; or, The Chained Hand.
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- 448 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defiance.
- 458 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Full Hand.
- 459 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Big Round-Up.
- 465 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Racket at Claim 10.
- 471 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Corral; or, Bozeman Bill.
- 476 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dog Detective.
- 481 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Deadwood.
- 491 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Compact.
- 496 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Inheritance.
- 500 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Diggings.
- 508 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deliverance.
- 515 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Protegee.
- 522 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Three.
- 529 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Danger Ducks.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Death Hunt.
- 589 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Texas.
- 544 Deadwood Dick, Jr., the Wild West Vindicator.
- 549 Deadwood Dick, Jr., on His Mettle.
- 554 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Gotham.
- 561 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Boston.
- 567 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Philadelphia.
- 572 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Chicago.
- 578 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Afloat.
- 584 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Denver.
- 590 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Decree.
- 595 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Reelzebub's Basin.
- 600 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Coney Island.
- 606 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Leadville Lay.
- 612 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Detroit.
- 618 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Cincinnati.
- 624 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Nevada.
- 630 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in No Man's Land.
- 636 Deadwood Dick, Jr., After the Queer.
- 642 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Buffalo.
- 648 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Chase Across the Continent.
- 654 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Among the Smugglers.
- 660 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Insurance Case.
- 666 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Back in the Mines.
- 672 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in Durango; or, "Gathered In."
- 678 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Discovery; or, Found a Fortune.
- 684 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dazzle.
- 690 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dollars.
- 696 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Danger Divide.
- 700 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Drop.
- 704 Deadwood Dick, Jr., at Jack-Pot.
- 710 Deadwood Dick, Jr., in San Francisco.
- 716 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Still Hunt.
- 722 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dominoes.
- 728 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Disguise.
- 734 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Deal.
- 740 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathwatch.
- 747 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Doublet.
- 752 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Deathblow.
- 758 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Strait.
- 764 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Lone Hand.
- 770 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Defeat.
- 776 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Resurrection.
- 782 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Dark Days.
- 787 Deadwood Dick, Jr., Defied.
- 792 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Double Device.
- 797 Deadwood Dick, Jr.'s, Desperate Venture.
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- 758 Violet Vane's Vision; or, The Fiery Hand of Fate.
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- 519 Captain Mystery; or, Five in One.
- 581 Daisy Dare the Sport from Denver.
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- 308 Dead Shot Dandy's Double; or, Keno Kit.
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- 245 Merle Monte's Leap for Life.
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- 264 Merle Monte's Treasure Island.
- 269 Merle Monte the Condemned.
- 276 Merle Monte's Cruise; or, "The Gold Ship" Chase.
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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
98 William Street, New York.